

Misrepresenting Seattle Pacific's Reasons for Suing Its State

University officials believed it needed to protect its First Amendment right to hire based on sincerely held religious beliefs and maintain a voluntary academic community based on a shared framework of faith.

// August 16, 2022

To the Editor;

The 8/1/22 *Inside Higher Ed* article, "Seattle Pacific Sues Washington AG," (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/01/seattle-pacific-sues-washington-keep-homophobic-policies>) contains several errors of fact that need to be corrected and additional editorial decisions that demonstrate bias in both terminology and perspective.

In the initial news sub-headline, author Josh Moody incorrectly described the reason Seattle Pacific University (SPU) was compelled to file a federal lawsuit in the Washington Western District Court against the state attorney general. This necessary action was not for any ordinary employment inquiry, but because the attorney general's egregious demand for confidential employment information related to University personnel and policies violates the essential protections under the law afforded to religious organizations, including institutions of Christian higher education. Knowing we are Christian leaders and witnesses to our students and community we discerned the need to defend them and the institution inspired by our shared mission.

We believe the AG's office has targeted the University because of our Christian beliefs and biblical worldview. Their investigation called into question SPU's legal right, protected by the First Amendment, to hire to mission based on sincerely held religious beliefs and to maintain a voluntary academic community based on a shared framework of faith. This lawsuit was necessary to ensure the University is able to protect its religious identity and Christian mission and purpose that have been its foundation for over 130 years. It is important to note that nothing has changed in regard to SPU's expectations for University employees, including faculty, to adhere to and uphold our statement of faith, and to both support – and advance – our collective mission among SPU peers, students, alumni and the larger community.

Regrettably, the overall framework of this article does not give a clear, truthful and objective view of the situation at SPU. Again, nothing has changed in our hiring practices, rights as a religious institution, our mission, Statement of Faith or behavioral Lifestyle Expectations, which shape the vision and mission of the institution as a Free Methodist-affiliated university. Regular employees that voluntarily decide to work and be a part of our community have always signed and accepted our staff and faculty handbook.

Another inaccuracy in your article that needs to be addressed is the relationship between SPU and The Free Methodist Church, both of which are Christian institutions that believe in the inherent truths of the Bible. There was never a change of policy or foundational belief by either entity.

SPU is an intentionally loving, grace-filled, welcoming community. In regard to faculty and staff, the University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability or genetic information, but it does exercise its right to hire based on sincerely held religious beliefs. SPU does not require students to indicate a faith affiliation, as we welcome and encourage thoughtful dialogue and robust academic inquiry among students, faculty and staff – including civil discussions about human sexuality and marriage. Our purpose has and will always remain to be a place where students can explore and go deeper in their faith.

Recent Board votes and decisions are in line with our role and responsibility to uphold the mission and purpose of the University, and to continue to protect our freedom to choose employees on the basis of religion, free from interference or intimidation from the government.

Seattle Pacific is not alone in this endeavor. Religious institutions across the country are being attacked despite their legal right that continues to be upheld by federal and state courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, to make faith-based hiring decisions and resolve issues of doctrine and practice without government interference.

First Amendment protections are at the heart of our pluralistic society and have led to the rich diversity of American religious education. As such, SPU will continue to provide a rigorous academic education to fulfill our mission to engage the culture and change the world by graduating next-generation leaders of competence and character, becoming people of wisdom and modeling grace-filled community.

*--Dean Kato
Board Chair
Seattle Pacific University*