

## ON CAMPUS, JOIN CAREFULLY

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It was a pleasant day in 1996, the bright start of Edwin Rodriguez's sophomore year at the University of Maryland's College Park campus. It was also the day, he says, he began to "get sucked into a cult."

"I was buying my books," says the former honors student. "[A member] came out of the blue. He asked me: 'Do you want to go to church? We're an international, multicultural, nondenominational church and we'd like to have you here.' "Mr. Rodriguez declined. A few days later, though, he accepted his third invitation to attend a "Bible study" session.

A year later, his money and former friends gone, his grades in the tank, he decided to leave the group, which he asked not be named for fear of retribution against him. He finally sought legal help to end phone calls from members questioning his decision. Only then did he discover the group's name was a front name for another organization.

Each fall, millions of college-bound students leave home and leap feet first into myriad campus organizations that are a vital part of college life. Most groups offer students exactly what they advertise. But others - whose focus may be loosely defined religious activities, racist practices, or self-realization, for example - employ a pattern of deception, from misleading "front" names to controlling behaviour that derails students' lives. Others claim to be churches, though they have no religious underpinnings. And the number of such "destructive groups" is growing.

Today, 3,000 to 5,000 "new religious movements" - many of which are legitimate - operate in North America. That's about 2,000 more than existed a decade ago, according to the American Family Foundation, a cult-awareness group in Naples, Fla.

With so many new organizations, it's difficult for students to know much about them. And, says Ronald Loomis, a former Cornell University administrator and education director of the AFF, "There are more destructive groups on campus now than ever, and they look much more mainstream than they did in the '60s."

### A favored recruiting spot

College campuses have long been a favored place for new religious and secular groups searching for energetic young members. Students are at a key transition point in their lives and are naturally open to new ideas.

But today, like much of the adult population, more students are searching for deeper meaning in their lives, and for a sense of belonging. Greater numbers of students are arriving on campus with personal problems, prompting universities to expand counselling services. Add increased academic and financial pressures, and some students may be vulnerable to destructive groups.

Reaction to these new forces on campus has been cautious. Across the United States, schools have typically offered little or no information about groups that recruit - in part out of concern about First Amendment rights. But experts say that they are

starting to see an uptick in the number of active campaigns that let students know of potentially destructive tactics and behaviors by groups on campus.

Mr. Loomis and others say "destructive groups" by definition set out to deceive students, often attempting to isolate them from parents and friends and increase their dependence on the group. Often they require them to earn money for the group.

At the extreme, some instill a philosophy of hate that can lead to violence. Earlier this month, Indiana University student Benjamin Smith shot 11 people, killing two - all minorities - near the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana and then Bloomington, Ind. He then killed himself.

Mr. Smith told a local newspaper last year that he had absorbed his hatred while in college. Some suggest the violence grew out of a group he joined in school.

Smith was recruited at the University of Illinois by the white-supremacist group World Church of The Creator (WCOTC), which describes itself as "the most anti-Christian church in the world."

Matthew Hale, WCOTC's founder, says in an interview that his church has a recruiting presence on dozens of campuses and more widely over the Internet. "We went after Harvard and ... Yale," he says. "We're definitely going after the big fish - to get the best and brightest."

"The white-supremacist movement is reaching people it's never reached before," says Mark Potok, who tracks hate groups for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Ala. "They're [all] making an explicit effort to reach these kids because they have a burning interest in developing a cadre of capable and intelligent leaders."

New face, same group

Part of the issue today is how such groups present themselves. Even old groups can be found morphing into new forms that mimic more-mainstream groups. Some students, for example, remember the Heaven's Gate cult in which 39 people killed themselves in 1997 when the Hale-Bopp comet passed by. Few realize Heaven's Gate continues to recruit on campuses under other names, AFF's Mr. Loomis says.

Given the push by groups to appear as mainstream as possible, university administrators may not see any problems until they look behind the facade, says Marcia Rudin, author of "Cults on Campus: The Continuing Challenge."

"They're very friendly, wonderful, clean-cut, normal-looking," she says. "So it's hard to tell on campus what's going to be destructive and what isn't."

Legal concerns temper action

But questions arise over just what universities can do about groups whose activities or philosophies raise red flags. "All of us want very much to respect freedom of religion, but colleges and universities are in a quandary over this issue," says Ronald Enroth, a professor of sociology at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif., who has written numerous books on cults.

With legal concerns in mind, some institutions take a laissez-faire approach. Other schools, however, feel an obligation to warn students about deceptive tactics - skirting First Amendment conflicts by not naming specific groups. They point to unacceptable "behavior, not beliefs" of groups, Professor Enroth says.

Other schools go further. A number of private US campuses, for example, have banned the Los-Angeles-based International Churches of Christ from recruiting on campus, Loomis says. (The group is not related to the United Church of Christ.)

A spokesman for the ICOC says it is simply an evangelical Christian church. "Most of the private schools where we do not have official recognition are religious universities and some have a nonproselytizing provision," says John Bringardner, general counsel for the ICOC. "We're a controversial group and some people don't like what we stand for. We have real jobs, real interests. We're trying the best we can to be like Jesus."

Public universities have generally found it more difficult to take action.

In the past decade, for instance, the University of Maryland at College Park has received many written complaints from parents, students, and faculty. One official says that the university has long had an orientation program to warn students without targeting specific groups. This year it also revamped its resident-assistant training program to include stronger warnings against RAs mixing their personal beliefs with their official duties.

"We accept responsibility for an environment that is free but relatively controlled for safety, while honoring others' rights," says William Thomas, Maryland's vice president for student affairs. "Obviously we can't control ideas, speech, and association. And that leads to students being confronted with new ideas."

Indeed, a survey this year by the university showed 21 percent of students knew a student who had joined an organization that they believed to be a cult - and 35 percent of those surveyed had been asked to join a group they thought to be a cult. Four out of 5 students wanted a cult-awareness program.

The state legislature, spurred by parent complaints and news articles, this year formed a task force to explore cult recruitment on public campuses. Other states and religious groups are watching closely.

The school is under scrutiny in part because of parents like Les Baker and his wife, Nora. In her sophomore year, the Bakers' daughter went to her resident assistant for help with a personal problem. The RA ended up recruiting her for "Upside Down Club" - a registered student group. She had no idea at the time it was affiliated with the ICOC, she said.

Soon, she was submitting a weekly and daily schedule to the RA for her approval. Her grades plunged. She was encouraged to sleep less. She began feeding group recruiters on her meal card, and gave the group thousands of dollars. Finally, she was planning to go to Iran to be a missionary and risk martyrdom.

Parent-child communication

The Bakers urged their daughter to meet with them to discuss the matter - telling her she could leave at any time. She agreed. They met with a counsellor in a ski cabin.

Three days later, having been shown the tax returns of the group's leader that showed a high income and photos of his California mansion, the daughter - who asked to remain unnamed - fell sobbing into her mother's arms.

Julia Becker, the RA who did the recruiting, says she recommended that the Bakers' daughter see a counsellor. She also acknowledges inviting her repeatedly to church functions. "I did invite her to things," Ms. Becker said in an interview. "She turned down specific things, but never said she had no interest at all. I'm used to inviting my friends to things."

Becker says she never deceived the student. But the name of her group indicated no obvious tie to ICOC.

"We abhor deception," says ICOC's Mr. Bringardner, who testified at the Maryland task-force hearings. "Deception is un-Christian.... Still, they're college kids. They want to have fun.... They don't want to call themselves the 'Maryland Church of Christ,' they want something cool. So they they choose a name, 'Campus Advance' or 'Upside Down Club.' "

Mr. Baker, like many other parents, seeks greater publicity for the issue. But the University of Maryland's Thomas is cautious.

"When a child gets enticed into a group and the family would have wanted conditions to be different ... we get blamed. We have tried to inform students as fairly as we could."

Some critics suggest that political correctness is a factor in schools' cautious response. Then there's vigorous debate about whether "brainwashing" in such groups is for real. Sceptics point out that turnover in many groups is high - showing that many people are able to exit on their own.

Nevertheless, schools are moving forward on some fronts. Like Maryland, Boston University has focused on thorough training of RAs, something administrators say has helped curb problems. Experts have also noticed an upsurge in campuses requesting speakers on such groups. And the number of campuses addressing the issue seems to be growing. Perhaps 200 schools - a small fraction-have such programs, Loomis estimates.

#### Better informing students

Since 1997, at least, the University of Maryland has had discussions of cult activities in orientation. But Rodriguez, the student who was recruited at the university and later left his group, says he doesn't remember ever hearing about cults or their tactics. Indeed, the January survey showed only 11 percent of students recalled ever receiving any cult-awareness information.

Rodriguez says now he should have been more alert. He was far from family. And though he was not attending church, down deep he was looking for one.

Yet Rodriguez was poorly informed. He could not know, for instance, that he had likely been targeted because he was an international student. He also knew nothing about the group's operations. So, in a small room with two members from a group

whose name he still did not know, he found himself being "love bombed" - told how special and loved he was - and berated for "sins" he had been encouraged to divulge.

After Rodriguez became involved with the group, he was handed a questionnaire in his calculus class one day. His professor, Denny Gulick, had been trying for years to get the university to take stronger action on destructive-group activities.

If half the answers to the questions were 'yes,' Dr. Gulick told his students, they were probably involved with a cult. Gulick offered to help students who thought they might need it. After class, Rodriguez told him of his problem.

At Gulick's suggestion, he began exercising his independence by asking questions about where his money went, for example. Finally, he quit attending meetings, though it took a formal letter from a lawyer to stop harassment from the group.

"It's hard to give advice," he says. "There are some really good groups around. I say, look at the previous history of the group - and don't go to any meetings right away."

Of parents, he says: "If they see their children not calling, or they don't know what's going on with them, that's a warning sign - especially if they were close before."

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#### Characteristics of destructive groups

A destructive group (cult-like) has a hidden agenda of power that is achieved by deceptive recruitment and control over the minds and lives of its members.

Leadership: A close allegiance to a charismatic leader (usually living).

Hidden purpose: An inordinate preoccupation with the attainment of money.

Recruitment: The employment of deceptive and high-pressure practices in recruiting new members.

Retention techniques: The use of behaviour-modification practices and brainwashing techniques to convert members, usually coupled with some form of separation from family, friends, and mainstream society.

Lifestyle demands: The requirement of total obedience within confining and enforced boundaries of membership, abdication of the right to leave the group and to say no, and widespread suspicion of, and hatred for, those outside the group. Comprehensive environment of lifestyle that occupies the entire person's attention, monitors activities such as food and sleep, and defines all activities.

Source: University of Maryland, College Park

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Caption: PHOTOS: 1) EDUCATOR 'Administrators may not see any problems until they look beyond the [group's] facade.' - Marcia Rudin BY BEN GARVIN 2)

STUDENT 'If parents don't know what's going on with their children, that's a

warning.' - Edwin Rodriguez 3) PARENT 'We have to address [destructive groups] as

an important subject.' - Les Baker 4) UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND: A survey this year found that 4 of 5 students would welcome a cult-awareness program. 5) R&R: Students chat at University of Maryland. A state task force is studying how groups recruit on campus. PHOTOS BY SHANA RAAB/SPECIAL TO THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

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