There are many ways to get a college education in the United States. You can attend a large public university or a small private college, or decide between a top-notch research institution or one emphasizing teaching and small classes.

You can choose a secular school or one shaped by the values of a particular religion. All feature quality education, but they differ in the social, religious and moral character of the student experience. High school graduates often pick a college by its social factors rather than its educational credentials.

Universities and colleges are generally free to shape their campus experience. At the University of Wyoming, for example, we emphasize our Rocky Mountain location, with outdoor science and recreational programs, including winter transportation to the local ski resort. As the "Cowboys," our sports program includes rodeo as well as football.

By contrast, the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., aims to provide a Catholic educational environment for its students. But as its new president John Garvey has worked to provide a Catholic campus experience, he has suddenly found himself with two major legal challenges.

The first challenge comes from his decision to change all freshman dormitories to single-sex housing this fall. While he clearly understands the change in terms of setting a Catholic tone to the campus, Garvey sees mixed-sex dorms fostering a culture of sexual activity that contributes to the struggles facing new college students as they strive for academic success. He cites several scientific studies indicating that heightened sexual activity among both men and women contributes to poor academic performance.

As a result, Catholic University is being sued by Professor John F. Banzhaf under Washington's strict anti-discrimination law. The restriction of freshman dorms to single-sex is criticized as sexual discrimination.

Although I do not know the details of the D.C. law, it seems to me that a university has the right to shape its campus culture according to its principles. Students are not required to attend Catholic University, but they go there because it promotes and teaches Catholic principles. Since Catholicism views sexual activity as proper only in the context of marriage, taking steps to reduce sexual activity is appropriate. It certainly does not need to make sexual activity easier by providing mixed dorms.

The second legal challenge facing President Garvey comes from the new health care law. Congress mandated that all medical insurance must support medical needs specific to women. Guidelines issued by the Department of Health and Human Services indicate these needs range from breastfeeding support and "well-women visits" to counseling on sexually transmitted diseases and domestic abuse. In a recent opinion piece in the Washington Post, Garvey pointed out that these regulations also require insurance that pays for contraception, sterilization and even so-called "morning-after pills" that induce abortions. Garvey points out that this puts Catholic University in the position of providing the very services that the Church's moral teachings forbid. "If we comply ... we will be helping our students do things that we teach them, in our classes and in our sacraments, are sinful-sometimes gravely so." Moreover, the HHS regulation impacts not just students, but all university employees.

This is a moral conundrum. On the one hand, Garvey rightly emphasizes the inappropriateness of a religious institution known for its anti-contraception and anti-abortion beliefs providing contraception and abortion. On the other hand, does such a large institution as the Catholic University have the right to decide access to health services for thousands of its employees and family members? Many if not most American Catholics disagree with their church's position on family planning and use contraceptives regularly. Furthermore, Catholic University employs many non-Catholics on its staff. Should the university force them to pay for contraceptive services when all other Americans can use them for free?

I juxtapose these two cases because they both pit the religious beliefs of the institution against the freedom of individuals to choose whether or not to practice those beliefs. Do the rights of a religious institution trump those of the individuals associated with it? Or should individual decision be the determining factor?

Flesher is director of UW's Religious Studies Program. Past columns and more information about the program can be found on the Web at www.uwyo.edu/relstds. To comment on this column, visit http://religion-today.blogspot.com.