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Posted on Thu, Dec. 01, 2005

## Group sues UW-Eau Claire, regents over Bible studies ban

Associated Press

**MADISON, Wis.** - The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire violated a student's constitutional right to free speech and religious freedom in banning him from leading Bible studies in his dorm room, according to a lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court.

The lawsuit, filed by student Lance Steiger, asks a judge to ban the university from enforcing the policy and seeks "nominal damages" plus attorney fees.

The lawsuit was filed Wednesday, the same day UW-Eau Claire Interim Chancellor Vicki Larson suspended the practice of banning resident assistants like Steiger from leading Bible studies in their dorm rooms. She said a campus review found the unwritten policy was poorly communicated and inconsistently enforced.

Larson said Steiger and the handful of resident assistants who had been told not to have Bible studies can now do so in their rooms as long as no one complains. She said she has not reached any conclusion on the constitutionality of the practice.

The suspension will last until a committee makes recommendations on UW System policies to guide the activities of resident assistants, who get free room and board and are paid stipends to supervise students in dorm rooms.

UW-Madison had a policy similar to UW-Eau Claire's in writing, and policies and practices at other UW campuses vary widely.


Steiger's civil rights lawsuit names Larson, two other university administrators and the UW System Board of Regents as defendants. UW-Eau Claire spokesman Mike Rindo declined comment Thursday because university officials had not seen the lawsuit.

Arizona-based Christian legal firm Alliance Defense Fund filed the lawsuit on Steiger's behalf. An attorney with the group, Kevin Theriot, said the university's suspension of the policy will not affect the lawsuit.

"Our lawsuit will proceed until it's clear that the constitutional rights of students will be respected," he said in a written statement. "It shouldn't take a committee to decide whether to respect the First Amendment rights of students."

Besides violating Steiger's constitutional rights, the lawsuit also alleged the UW-Eau Claire policy

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discriminates against religious students who want to be resident assistants by censoring them from talking about religious content in their rooms.

In return for being a resident assistant, Steiger receives room, board and \$675 per month, the lawsuit said. The flawed policy conditions a government benefit "on the forfeiture of a fundamental individual right," the lawsuit said.

Theriot said universities should not treat Christian students any differently than other students.

"Essentially, the university is saying that, if you're a student dorm leader and you're not being disruptive, you can hold a 'kegger,' but you can't hold a Bible study," he said. "This incredibly broad restriction on all RA speech seems to have been applied solely to religious speech in yet another example of political correctness run amok."

**ON THE NET**

Alliance Defense Fund: <http://www.alliancedefensefund.org>

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire: <http://www.uwec.edu/home/>

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