



October 31, 2007

Samantha K. Harris  
Director of Legal and Public Advocacy  
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education

Dear Ms. Harris,

Thank you for your letter to President Patrick Harker dated October 29, 2007 detailing your concerns about the University of Delaware's residence life educational program. I appreciate your commitment to the role of free speech in education. Though we may articulate views quite differently, a commitment to free speech is one we share. As noted in our own literature, "the central mission of the University of Delaware is to cultivate both learning and the free exchange of ideas."

Your letter asserts a number of conclusions that can be supported by a selective citation of documents, but are not actualized. The idea that students are "required to adopt university approved views" on the issues listed is not a goal of this institution or of the residence life department. This type of goal is both highly undesired and wholly unattainable. Students are challenged to express themselves as free-thinking citizens. The indoctrination you speak of serves no educational purpose and does not exist as part of a systematic effort on this campus. I assume that you have noted the absence of any policy, rule, or regulation pertaining to your concerns about disciplinary action being taken against students for unwillingness to be changed in the manner that you describe.

There is in fact a program within the residence halls that engages students in self-examination of the roles they hope to take in society. This effort is consistent with the mission of the University which states, "Our graduates should know how to reason critically and independently...communicate clearly in writing and speech, and develop into informed citizens and leaders." The program is designed to encourage students to think about and to consider a number of issues, but all make their own decisions about the outcome of this reflection. FIRE's assertion that students are told what to think is inaccurate. In common with FIRE, our institution values free speech, active voice, and open dialogue. We believe that students learn and grow in part by engaging in significant discussions on both sides of the classroom door.

I do acknowledge that there have been some missteps with the implementation of our program. This is a new effort involving over two hundred staff. As with any University educational endeavor assessment and feedback measures have been established to identify issues or concerns. Each of the issues FIRE presents are currently under review. In fact, we recently became aware that students in several residence halls were told their participation is mandatory at these activities and we have taken steps to clarify this misconception and to notify students of their rights in this area.

Additionally, I would like to briefly comment on several of the other concerns expressed in your letter.

- The information about "best and worst" RA/resident one-on-ones are certainly of concern, but taken out of context. This terminology has only been used by supervisors to ask Resident Assistants to reflect on their facilitation skills and never to describe students or the outcome of a conversation.
- Students are not required to participate in any residential activity, educational program, or to maintain the University provided nametag on their door. We do, however, encourage students to participate in as many experiences as they are able as we believe this enhances their life at the University.
- We share your concern about the language used in our assessment plan. The term "treatment" is commonly used in research and assessment literature. Admittedly, this language is easily misinterpreted and may be construed as inappropriate for use in this educational setting. On the other hand, your assertion that "progress is apparently determined by examining whether there is an increasing proportion of 'right' answers over time" is not an accurate way to describe the aim of the program or assessment goals.

I have tremendous respect for the ability of our students as well as their emotional and intellectual capacity. My main point of contention out of the multiple assertions is that the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education seems to presume that our students are so empty-headed and ignorant that they would be "indoctrinated" with ease. I believe you have underestimated the quality and caliber of our students. You have examined many internal and public documents in your search for concerns. I invite you to explore our web site more fully to get a better picture of the capacity of a University of Delaware student. You will find that they are highly intelligent and capable to assert their viewpoints and to face challenges from a variety of areas. Our students are fully able to encounter multiple values and perspectives and remain true to their own identity. As they emerge from college, their ability to use their free speech rights will be only one of many talents they possess. While I consider many of your points to be open for legitimate discussion and debate, the supposition that University of Delaware students are simply empty vessels to be filled by any willing authority figure is an unstated assertion where we can find no common ground.

As I hope I have expressed through this letter, I am aware that issues and concerns exist as we ask students to discuss and share their own viewpoints on important issues. I do appreciate your organization's interest in higher education in general and free speech specifically. Your points will continue to be examined as a part of the overall review mechanism.

Sincerely,

Michael Gilbert, Ed. D.  
Vice President for Student Life  
University of Delaware