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Higher Education News

University of Delaware Accused of Indoctrinating Students

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by Associated Press
Oct 31, 2007, 18:05

DOVER Del.

The University of Delaware has come under fire by a civil rights group that claims the school is trying to force dormitory residents to adopt university-approved ideologies on moral and social issues.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said the university's residence life education program amounts to an "Orwellian" attempt at thought control that violates students' rights to freedom of conscience and freedom from compelled speech.

"FIRE writes to dozens of schools each year in defense of students' individual rights, but we have never encountered a more systematic assault upon individual liberty, dignity, privacy and autonomy of university students than this program," FIRE's director of legal and public advocacy, Samantha Harris, wrote in a letter sent Monday to UD President Patrick Harker.

FIRE officials called for the program, whose goal is for students to attain "citizenship," to be dismantled immediately. They asked the university to respond no later than Nov. 5 "because of the severe and ongoing rights violations."

UD spokesman Neil Thomas said officials were reviewing the letter.

FIRE president Greg Lukianoff said the group began looking into the university's residence hall program after being contacted by a parent and a professor, and that it also has spoken to several students.

"I'm really deeply disappointed that college administrators would embrace such a program," he said. "It shows real contempt for their own students."

According to FIRE, the university sees the program as a "treatment" for incorrect student beliefs on issues ranging from politics to race, sexuality and the environment.

"The university has decided that it is not enough to expose its students to the values it considers important; instead, it must coerce its students into accepting those values as their own," Lukianoff said. "At a public university like Delaware, this is both unconscionable and unconstitutional."

According to the Office of Residence Life's diversity vision statement, "racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism and other behaviors and systems that empower some while oppressing others will not be tolerated." The "competencies" that students are expected to achieve include recognizing that "systemic oppression exists in our society."

"Students will understand they have stereotypes and they will begin questioning which stereotypes they have," according to the objectives for educational floor meetings led by resident assistants.

Dorm residents are expected to attend the floor sessions, as well as one-on-one training sessions with the resident assistants. Sample questions for the one-on-one sessions include "When were you first made aware of your race?" and "When did you discover your sexual identity?"

Resident assistants and administrators undergo their own diversity training.

According to documents obtained by FIRE, a training session in August was led by Shakti Butler, executive director of California-based World Trust Educational Services. Butler's presentation included a glossary that defines "racist" as a term synonymous with White supremacist, and one that applies to "all White people" in the United States "regardless of class, gender, religion, culture or sexuality."

On the other hand, "people of color cannot be racists," and there is no such thing in the United States as "reverse racism," a term "created and used by White people to deny their privilege."

Brooke Aldrich, 18, a freshman from Hockessin, said that after one floor meeting for residents of Russell dorm, "I came out feeling like I was a racist somehow because I was a White person or because I haven't been oppressed."

Aldrich said that at her first floor meeting, the RA read a series of statements on issues including gay marriage and affirmative action, to which students had to agree or disagree.

"The thing that irritated us the most is that we were not able to debate

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back and forth, we just had to choose a side," she said.

Aldrich said students had been told that the meetings were mandatory, but that the Office of Resident Life sent an e-mail on Friday suggesting that they were voluntary, which Aldrich said contradicts what students repeatedly were led to believe.

On the Net

FIRE: <http://www.thefire.org>

Office of Residence Life: <http://www.udel.edu/reslife>

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