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FIRE president speaks on campus

The Flip Side invites Lukianoff to weigh in on UWEC controversies

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Restricting free speech to prevent people from feeling offended or uncomfortable should not be the prerogative of government or its affiliates, said Greg Lukianoff, president of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

"It's absurd to try to police demeaning speech," Lukianoff said before a crowd Wednesday night in Schofield Hall. "That's not what a free society does."

Lukianoff's appearance at UW-Eau Claire served as a fundraiser for The Flip Side and came after FIRE's involvement in various ideological controversies surrounding the university.

He expressed his views on freedom of speech, the establishment clause of the First Amendment, the definition of harassment and other principles, relating them to campus issues.

Those issues included Student Senate's initial refusal in fall 2004 to grant The Flip Side funding based on a possible political slant, and the ongoing battle over Eau Claire's suspended policy prohibiting senior RA Lance Steiger from holding Bible study in his room or residence hall.

He would not discuss the university's ban of religious activities counting for Service-Learning credit - another controversy his organization has weighed in on - saying he was not well-versed on the issue and that FIRE already had communicated its position on the matter.

Speaking to the ongoing controversy over the RA Policy, Lukianoff said the establishment clause prohibits government from declaring a state religion, but also from prohibiting the free practice of any faith.

Trying to ensure that RAs remain "approachable" to residents by restricting their religious freedoms, he said, not only is illegal, it suggests they cannot remain professional.

"That's assuming that they're just going to misuse their power," he said.

Offending someone by expressing beliefs on ideology or other topics, he said, should not be restricted and often is confused with legitimate harassment.

"I am critical of the way the word harassment is used," he said. "Real harassment is something serious. You don't want to trivialize it."

Feeling offended by someone's beliefs, he said, actually is part of a process that helps people develop stronger convictions. That process, he said, is an important part of education.

"If you haven't been offended by the time you graduate from college, ask for your money back," he said.

Legitimate cases of harassment should be dealt with, he said.

At the same time, the university should be concerned with safeguarding itself against frivolous lawsuits over harassment, but through overly broad, restrictive policies, he said.

Some ideas for a proper policy on the RA controversy that do not infringe on individual rights include requiring RAs to make clear the difference between their views and those of the university, and to set up office hours during which religious, political sales-related activities cannot be conducted, he said.

Junior Chris Nielson, constitutional adviser for The Flip Side and an organizer of the event, said Lukianoff discussed issues students need to be aware of, regardless of their views.

"I think it was a good thing for students to hear," he said.

Senior Andrew Werthmann said he agreed with some of Lukianoff's points, but not with others.

Reacting to Lukianoff's statement that it is often liberals who strive for political correctness but ironically end up restricting personal freedoms, Werthmann said he didn't think that dynamic had to do with the university's position.

"I don't think that's what the motivation was," he said. "The question is if (an RA is) an employee ... can they have personal time to do what they want?"

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