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Policy allows dorms RA's Bible study

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A student who supervises student housing in the University of Wisconsin System has the same rights as the students being supervised.

That simple statement reached biblical proportions Thursday when System officials recommended a policy designed to resolve an issue that erupted at UW-Eau Claire last fall. A resident assistant there was told to stop leading Bible study groups in his dormitory room.

The RA, Lance Steiger, with help from a conservative foundation in Philadelphia, filed a federal lawsuit claiming his right to worship freely was violated by UW-Eau Claire's unwritten policy - now suspended - that prohibited RAs from holding political, religious or sales events in the dorms in which they work.

System President Kevin Reilly said the policy will help all students, including RAs, "create an open and inclusive environment for students who live on campuses."

The policy, which requires approval by the UW Board of Regents, says RAs may "participate, organize, and lead any meetings or other activities within their rooms, floors or residence halls, or anywhere else on campus, to the same extent as other students. However, they may not use their positions to inappropriately influence, pressure, or coerce student residents to attend or participate."

Neither the Alliance Defense Fund nor the state Department of Justice office could say what the status of the lawsuit was Wednesday afternoon. Steiger's telephone answering machine in Eau Claire referred questions to the Alliance Defense Fund.

System spokesman Doug Bradley said it became clear after comments were solicited that the lack of a systemwide policy was part of the problem.

"We are a loose confederation of states on some issues, and the various campuses do a variety of things on their own," he said. "Some had written policies, and some didn't. This one (Eau Claire) didn't."

Reilly, in a statement, warned, "I don't expect that creating systemwide rules will halt debate on this issue, nor will the policy address every situation that might arise."

Reilly appointed a group in December of "residence life professionals" and others to examine the issue, which he described

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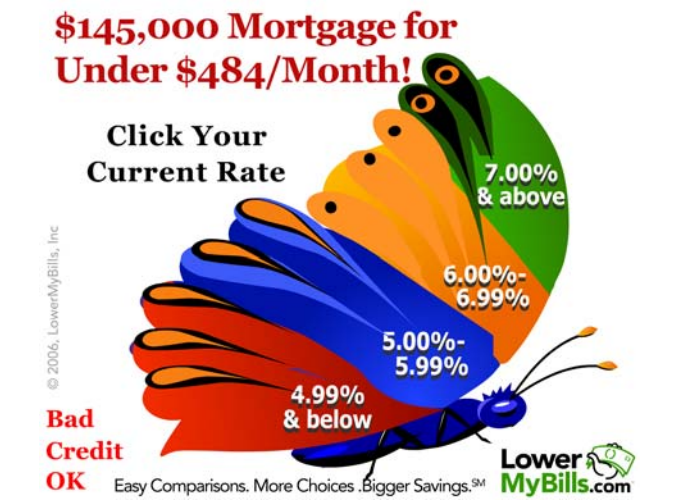

as "the role of RAs in leading, organizing, or recruiting students for certain activities in residence halls where they live and work, as well as restrictions on such activities."

More than 500 responses were logged on an Internet forum, about two-thirds from state residents, Bradley said.

He said that since the Eau Claire case surfaced and attracted nationwide publicity, there were no additional complaints about similar issues from other state campuses.

Resident assistants receive free room and board and stipends to supervise students on their dorm floors and are considered state employees.

Steiger challenged UW-Eau Claire's unwritten policy after an administrator warned him in July and again in September that he could face discipline if he continued to hold Bible studies in his room. The official, associate housing director Deborah Newman, said Steiger's encouragement of people to participate in the studies conflicted with his responsibility to create a welcoming environment for other students.

Steiger, a senior business finance major, said the ban surprised him because he never received complaints. He said the Bible studies, as part the university's chapter of Campus Crusade for Christ, never interfered with his RA duties.

The 21-year-old went to the Alliance Defense Fund after another RA approached Newman to urge her to change the policy but was not successful.

"Christians and non- Christians alike are surprised and usually their first comment is, 'They can't do that,' " Steiger said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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