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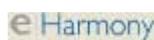
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Local private colleges continue to allow Bible study in dorms

By Sharon Roznik
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Two local private colleges have little to worry about when it comes to state intervention in resident assistant-led Bible studies.

A recent ban on private, RA-led Bible studies at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire is under scrutiny by Wisconsin Attorney General Peg Lautenschlager.

UW System President Kevin Reilly asked Lautenschlager to assess the legality of Eau Claire's ban on such activities since similar rules apply at other UW colleges.

Ripon College and Marian College have always allowed RAs to practice their religious beliefs and, school officials say, so far there have been no complaints.

The difference is neither college receives the majority of its funding from the state and federal government, said Ripon's Dean of Students Chris Ogle.

"We have a lot more flexibility being a private school," he said.

The state controversy began in July when an Eau Claire administrator banned RAs from leading private, non-school-sponsored Bible studies in their dorms. The concern was some students might feel RAs were unapproachable because of their religious beliefs.

Meanwhile the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education is blasting the state college for violating the basic civil liberties of students.

Tim Nikolai, a student at Ripon College and member of its Campus Christian Fellowship, said Ripon RAs who are Christian must be

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Adam Hentz, left, Justin Yonki and Aleci their dorm room at Ripon College. Bible college, even those studies led by resider

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versatile enough to pass out condoms, a requirement for any Ripon RA.

"I think we've gone too far in trying to sanitize the public to any mention of religion," he said. About 40 students at Ripon meet weekly for a Bible study usually held in one of the dorm room lounges.

Students at Marian College are not bound by regulations regarding their personal or spiritual life, said resident hall director Amy Slager.

"They could lead Bible studies in their dorm — as long as they don't push their own values on other people. I don't think it takes away their ability to be approached by anyone," she said.

Ripon Religion and Political Science Professor Brian Smith said the UW-Eau Claire ban is right and justifiable.

"From a legal perspective, if an RA is an employee of the state getting paid with taxpayer's money, it's very careful of what he does while doing his work and in the vicinity of his work," he said.

Other students may not be able to identify with an RA that leads a Bible study in his or her dorm room campus, in a church or a private home, it would be a completely different story.

"If state teachers cannot lead a prayer in a classroom, how can an RA in a dorm room?" Smith asked.

Ogle said the college's position has always been one of teaching students to "integrate insights and disciplines and apply them to their own lives."

"We feel pretty strongly there's value in exposing yourself to conversations about things that both matter to you," he said.

No student is subject to one RA, Ogle said.

"Maybe you have an RA who is really pro athletics and as a student you question athletics. Maybe you are a republican. There is always someone a student can go to," he said.

Some RAs are members of Campus Christians, Nikolai said, and no concerns arose. Students served are allowed to opt out of any requirements, like dispensing contraception, on grounds of religious beliefs.

"I honestly don't think if it was taken to court it would hold up because it's infringing on people's personal freedoms."

"A good RA can overcome any possible perceptions and be there for anyone who needs them," he said.

Slager said Marian, a private college affiliated with the Catholic Church, has students attending from 15 states and employs 15 RAs.

"One of our core values is spiritual tradition, and that includes exploring meditation and other religious practices to offer a variety of activities, including studies of other religions."

Smith said by all rights an RA should not be a political activist either.

"Politics and religion always cause divisions among people," he said. "An RA needs to be open to everyone."



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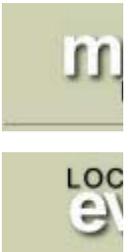
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