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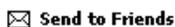
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Thought Reform, Ideological Coercion, and the State of the American University

Luke Sheahan

The University of Delaware (UD) recently was guilty of implementing one of the most invasive reeducation programs for students in the country. UD, like many campuses, requires its first-year students to live in on-campus housing. While there, they were forced to undergo invasive "treatment" (the university's own words) aimed at changing their incorrect attitudes and beliefs. The "treatment" includes private interviews with their Resident Assistants (RAs) where they were asked a series of invasive questions.

Students who demonstrated any resistance to the program or the questions were subsequently reported by the RA to the university. It was blatant and undisguised thought reform. Only a month and a half ago and only after intense public pressure and embarrassment did the university agree to abandon its dorm reeducation program.

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) was responsible for exposing the curriculum. FIRE's letter described the program thusly:

The program...requires students to adopt highly specific university-approved views on issues ranging from politics to sexuality, sociology, moral philosophy, and even science. These views are reinforced through a comprehensive manipulation of the residence hall environment, from required meetings and one-on-one sessions all the way to door decorations. The program brazenly invades students' privacy and forces them to confess their

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"privilege" or their "oppression." Students' progress towards the desired outcome is recorded by Resident Assistants (RAs) and reported to their superiors.

The program was billed as a "curricular approach to residence education." Students are to be taught the meaning of "citizenship" defined as a number of "competencies" students "must develop in order to become fully functional and effective citizens." The competencies include the following: "Students will recognize that systemic oppression exists in our society," "Students will recognize the benefits of dismantling systems of oppression," and "Students will be able to utilize their knowledge of sustainability to change their daily habits and consumer mentality."

To attain these "competencies," students were required to attend training sessions, floor assemblies, and one-on-one meetings with their RAs. In the training sessions, RAs presented students with specific views on various political issues including racism, diversity, environmentalism, and social justice the university wanted them to hold. RAs were given a list of definitions of racism. It included the following: "A RACIST: A racist is one who is both privileged and socialized on the basis of race by a white supremacist (racist) system. The term applies to all white people (i.e., people of European descent) living in the United States, regardless of class, gender, religion, culture or sexuality"; "REVERSE RACISM: A term created and used by white people to deny their white privilege"; and "A NON-RACIST: A non term. The term was created by whites to deny responsibility for systemic racism...." (Emphases added.)

At floor meetings, which according to the university's literature were mandatory, students were required to participate in certain activities that were supposed to teach them the university's values. The exercises were intrusive and humiliating. Students were asked about their social identities and asked to explain the stereotypes they hold of other demographics. One student reported that his RA asked him to list stereotypes of Jews. When he did so, some Jewish students became angry with him. But he was only following the university's directions and not expressing his own beliefs. The program's stipulations jeopardized this student's cordial relationship with his floormates and brought ugly stereotypes, previously and appropriately silent and ignored and on the road to the forgotten, back to the fore.

At the one-on-one meetings, RAs were instructed by the university to ask such intrusive and private questions as "When did you discover your sexual identity?" RAs wrote reports on some of these one-on-one meetings and turned them in to their superiors. They identified their "best and worst" students and reported any students who resisted the efforts of their RAs to Residence Life.

Students were pressured to make outward gestures of assent to the university's position. Students in one dorm complex were asked by their RA to agree to reduce their ecological footprint by 20% before the next meeting; in another complex, students were forced to participate in a "Cultural Plunge assignment" where they hung out with people from a social identity group with which they felt uncomfortable. In one complex, students were required to keep a portfolio that indicated their contributions to the community. They were given a transcript of their activities, and students with low participation were asked to join focus groups to determine why they weren't participating in their community.

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UD's capitulation in no way mitigates the horror that such a program could exist on a university campus. The complete disregard for human dignity and privacy is astounding. That anyone associated with institutions of higher learning, traditionally bastions of free inquiry and expression, could believe in the rightness of such a program targeting the very thoughts and feelings of students is nearly incredible.

As FIRE wrote, "Such utter contempt for the autonomy and free agency of others is the hallmark of totalitarianism and has no place in any free society, let alone at a public university..." Unfortunately such is the state of the modern American university.

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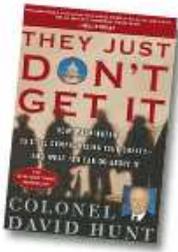
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