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November 29, 2007 12:00 AM



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Tarred with the same Big Brother brush

David Cohen on the University of Delaware's controversial race-awareness programme

At the climax of his classic work, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell condemns his fictional hero, Winston Smith, to a terrifying spell inside a cell with the object of his deepest fear. As heavy scenarios go, that doesn't sound too far removed from how critics of the University of Delaware described its diversity training educational programme (or 'the Class of 1984' as others were calling it).

According to the *National Journal*, the Residence Life programme included one-on-one meetings between students and programme organisers, as well as group sessions aimed at schooling students in some, um, 'interesting' definitions of racism:

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.

Students who resisted the sessions apparently ran the risk of being reported and having their academic careers suffer.

The exercise, which has been of some international interest on account of America's well-earned reputation as an incubator for academic trends of this sort, has come under fire in the last month from a civil liberties advocacy group, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which monitors freedom of speech issues on campuses. Some parents and scholars were also aghast at what one person called the "illegal attempt to change the attitudes, beliefs, and actions of students".

FIRE assailed Delaware for remaining, in its view, "terrifyingly unaware that a state-sponsored institution of higher education in the United States does not have the legal right to engage in a program of systematic thought reform".

Initially at least, Delaware tried to make light of the issue, pooh poohing the conservative group's