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Delaware U's Illiberal Education

By Sara Dogan

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In a tersely worded statement issued on November 1st, University of Delaware President Patrick Harker brought an end to an Orwellian reeducation program run through the Office of Residence Life and affecting thousands of students living in residence halls at the University of Delaware. Published accounts of the residence life education program and publicly available documents show it to be a systemic model of leftist and politically correct indoctrination, foisted on vulnerable students by a publicly-funded university. Although the program has now been temporarily dismantled because of the adverse publicity it received, the very existence of such an insidious indoctrination camp at one of our public institutions of education should be a wake-up call to all Americans about the lengths that college administrators will go to enforce their ideology on the students under their charge.

Credit for public exposure of this program belongs to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) which wrote to Delaware President Patrick Harker on October 29 to express outrage over the intrusive and unconstitutional program and to demand its immediate termination. Citing such factors as the program's designation in internal materials as a "treatment" designed to modify student beliefs and actions and its encouragement to students to confess either their "privilege" or their "oppression," FIRE Director of Legal and Public Advocacy Samantha Harris wrote to Harker that "we have never encountered a more systematic assault upon the individual liberty, dignity, privacy, and autonomy of university students than this program....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 in the state of Delaware."

Internal materials provided to Residence Hall Advisers (RAs) at the University of Delaware and made available on FIRE's website reveal the program's machinations to be extremely sinister, more reminiscent of a Communist autocracy than of the United States of America. The program affected approximately 7,000 students living in the University's eight on-campus residence halls, including a disproportionate number of freshmen who are required by the University to live in on-campus housing if they are not living with family.

Among the coercive and unconstitutional features of the program flagged by FIRE:

- As part of the University's "curricular approach to residence

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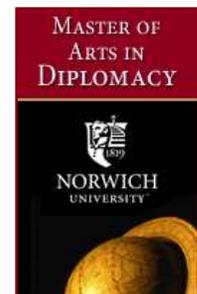
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education,” students were expected to become educated in “citizenship” which the University defined as “understanding how your thoughts, values, beliefs, and actions affect the people with whom you live and recogniz[ing] your responsibility to contribute to a sustainable society at a local, national, and global level.”

- The Office of Residence Life cited a list of “competencies” that all students “must develop in order to become fully functional and effective citizens towards a sustainable society after they leave the University of Delaware.” These “competencies” included “Students will recognize that systematic oppression exists in our society” and “Students will be able to utilize their knowledge of sustainability to change their daily habits and consumer mentality.”
- Students were encouraged to attend meetings and workshops with their RAs including “one-on-one” sessions where they are questioned on a wide variety of social and ethical issues including their commitment to overturning racism, promoting diversity and environmentalism, and instituting social justice. Although these meetings were technically supposed to be optional, in their ideological zeal, or else from a desire to please the university bureaucracy, some RAs told students that such meetings were mandatory. It is clear from the nature of the questions and write-ups of the sessions that there were clearly right and wrong answers. RAs at some of the housing complexes were required to write up their “best” and “worst” one-on-one sessions and hand them in to administrators. In a transcript of two “one-on-one” sessions provided by an RA in the Russell Complex, a session described by an RA as “best” notes that the student related that she “grew up with a racist and opinionated father” who discouraged her from being a Democrat. By contrast, in the session described as “worst” the student objects to the questions being asked of her, stating that she was tired of having “diversity shoved down her throat” and answers a question asking “When did you discover your sexual identity” with “That is none of your damn business.”
- Upon reviewing the internal materials of the Office of Residence Life programs, FIRE described the program as “using the harrowing language of ideological reeducation.” For instance, the Gilbert/Harrington complex’s “assessment plan” states that “through the Gilbert/Harrington curriculum experience (a treatment) specific attitudinal or behavioral changes (learning) will occur.” A curriculum assessment plan from the Russell Complex questions: “What is [students’] attitude and/or values about those specific social identities after the treatment?”
- At an August 2007 “diversity facilitation training” session for RAs, students were given a list of “definitions and descriptions of racism.” The list defines “A RACIST” as “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” is defined as “A term created and used by white people to deny their white privilege” and “A NON-RACIST” is declared to be “A non term...created by whites to deny responsibility for systemic racism....”
- The Rodney Housing Complex documents echo the language of psychological conditioning, explaining that they chose to hire “strong male RA’s” after concluding that male students displayed “a higher degree of resistance to educational efforts” than female

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students and that a strong male figure “combats male residents’ concepts of traditional male identity.”

- Some of the university’s housing complexes even used the residence life education program to dictate what decorations students place on their doors. At the Dickson complex, students were encouraged to put a symbol consisting of three interlocking circles on their doors which represents the “triple bottom line” of sustainability which is defined as “the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity.”

Citing these and many other factors, FIRE declared in its letter to Harker that “The residence life education program, which presumes to show students the specific ideological assumptions they need in order to be better people, crosses the boundary from education into unconscionably arrogant, invasive, and immoral thought reform. We can conceive of no way in which the residence life education program can be maintained consistent with the ideals of a free society.”

FIRE also made the case that the program was clearly unconstitutional, pointing to the 1943 case of *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* in which the Supreme Court ruled 8-1 that a provision requiring students and faculty in the state of West Virginia to salute the flag or face expulsion or termination was unconstitutional because it forced them to declare a view that was contrary to their beliefs. Writing for the Court, Justice Robert Jackson declared that “To sustain the compulsory flag salute we are required to say that a Bill of Rights which guards the individual’s right to speak his own mind, left it open to public authorities to compel him to utter what is not in his mind... Free public education, if faithful to the ideal of secular instruction and political neutrality, will not be partisan or enemy of any class, creed, party, or faction.”

Amazingly, despite the enormous weight of the evidence produced by FIRE proving the residence life education program to be both oppressive of free thought and unconstitutional, the University of Delaware’s immediate reaction was to defend their program. University of Delaware Vice President for Student Life Michael Gilbert responded to FIRE’s letter by defending the program as “engag[ing] students in self-examination of the roles they hope to take in society” and denying that any systematic indoctrination was occurring. His sole concessions to FIRE’s scathing indictment of the program were to “acknowledge that there have been some missteps with the implementation of our program” and to state that “we share your concern about the language used in our assessment plan,” most notably the word “treatment” which he attempted to defend as being “commonly used in research and assessment literature.”

Firing off an immediate response to Gilbert, FIRE again went on the offensive, stating that they were “shocked and disappointed that the University of Delaware has chosen to defend its invasive and unconstitutional residence life education program” and to “obfuscate, deny, and distort the program’s intention, its operation, and its effect.” FIRE challenged Gilbert’s claims that they had quoted isolated sections of the program “curriculum,” stating that “as readers will see upon examination, the concerns we have raised pervade every one of the hundreds of pages that constitute the University of Delaware’s residence life curriculum.”

Finally, finding the residence life education program to be indefensible to the public and overwhelmed by the public exposure and burgeoning media storm, the University of Delaware capitulated. President Patrick Harker issued a brief statement on the school's website announcing that he "directed that the program be stopped immediately" and announcing that "No further activities under the current framework will be conducted." The program is now temporarily suspended pending review.

Harker's statement is a classic example of avoidance. He questions whether media accounts of the program were in fact accurate, while attempting to deflect attention from the program's true purpose of reeducation. He fails to mention that the same Vice President for Student Life, Michael Gilbert, who he cites as recommending the cessation of the program, had staunchly defended it only the day before. He also entirely avoids the question of how a program that should strike any American citizen with knowledge of the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech and freedom of thought to be tyrannical was allowed to be implemented at Delaware in the first place. This truly is the pivotal question. Are oversights at our public university campuses really so minimal that no one thought to flag a program purporting to devise "treatment" for students' unacceptable thoughts? Or worse yet, did administrators simply ignore the ideological and thought-controlling aspects of the program in their zeal to reeducate the student body?

Faced with anecdotal evidence of classroom indoctrination and institutional one-sidedness and blacklisting of alternative viewpoints, college administrators and educational associations invoke a standard line: It's not happening. During legislative hearings on academic freedom in Pennsylvania, Temple University President David Adamany claimed that during five years in that position, not a single academic freedom complaint had crossed his desk, though many students have documented abuses experienced during this time period. A report on "Freedom in the Classroom" issued in 2007 by the American Association of University Professors states that "Although contemporary critics of higher education have alleged that widespread abuse of the classroom is a fixture of the academic scene, the many legislative hearings and investigations nationwide have failed to substantiate the charge." Yet where was the AAUP when the University of Delaware was indoctrinating and attempting to reeducate thousands of students under its residence life education program? As of the writing of this article, the AAUP has yet to issue a press release or public statement decrying the Delaware thought-control program.

The mainstream higher education media either ignored the story or gave it minimal attention. On October 30th, the day after FIRE sent its letter to Harker and went public with their investigation into the University of Delaware's residence life education program, InsideHigherEd.com, one of the premier websites chronicling higher education news, did not mention the story at all, though conservative news site *WorldNetDaily.com* and columnist John Leo picked it up instantly, and the *Associated Press* reported on it the following day. In fact, *InsideHigherEd's* only mention of the story was one brief paragraph included in their "Quick Takes" on November 2nd reporting that the program had been terminated. The paragraph's headline, "Delaware Halts Program" makes no mention of the reasons why the program was so abruptly halted. The lead articles on the same day included a piece on possible changes to Pell Grants and one on the efforts of campuses to reduce the need for students to take out loans to pay for their education. Apparently these concerns merited greater attention than the University of Delaware's forced reeducation of

thousands of students. Scott Jaschik, *InsideHigherEd's* editor, confirmed that the website did not cover the story beyond the single note, but defended this decision, stating that "We take the [First Amendment] issues FIRE and others raise seriously -- but that doesn't mean extensive coverage of every case."

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* did somewhat better, with a short note in their online "Daily News" on October 31 and a November 2 piece titled "U. of Delaware Halts Residence-Life Program That Was Criticized as 'Thought Reform,'" but it too waited until after the program's termination to extensively cover the story.

In the two weeks that have passed since the program's termination, new evidence continues to emerge that the program was designed to indoctrinate students with a leftist political mentality and left no room for dissension. Some of the most disturbing evidence has come from the RA's and students who participated in the residence life education program who have stepped forward (in some cases anonymously because they fear reprisals) to add additional testimony about the program's insidious purposes.

One former Delaware RA who contacted FIRE wrote, "I was an RA before they started this new curriculum at the University of Delaware. When they instituted this curriculum, they had a 'you better love it, or get out!' attitude... Many of the former RAs who had returned were fed up with this curriculum, and any time we spoke up about it, our concerns were shot down, and we were branded as trouble makers ... supervisors were selected not based on their abilities to manage dorms ... but instead, those RAs who were most passionate about the curriculum got to lead the residence halls."

A student who participated in the program wrote to FIRE about the pressure to conform to the ideological tenor of the curriculum: "In one activity we were required to agree or disagree with a statement, when asked if we could abstain or be neutral, our RA promptly said that she would not proceed with the activity until everyone had taken a side. The flaw in this program was that on more than one occasion I found myself to be neutral on the statement she gave, but the nature of the program prevented me from expressing my view and forced me to take a side that I did not agree with."

Another student confirmed that participation in the program was for all practical purposes mandatory: "We all received e-mails yesterday stating that the floor meetings were not mandatory, just encouraged, but yet, I've had my RA call me on two occasions asking where I was when I wasn't present at one, and asking me if I would make it back in time, or when I wanted to make it up."

While the Delaware indoctrination program has deservedly been at least temporarily relegated to the trash heap of academic history, the administrative failure to protect or even acknowledge student rights and the blind worship of political correctness that allowed the program to emerge in the first place are still in full swing on America's campuses. "The reeducation program at the University of Delaware is simply the latest example of a university doing in private what they cannot defend in public," said David Horowitz, chairman of Students for Academic Freedom, an organization dedicated to protecting students' constitutional rights and academic freedoms on college and university campuses. "It falls to the American public to maintain constant vigilance to ensure that our students' basic rights and freedoms are protected. It is clear that our universities are not up to the task."

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