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## New UD residence life program passes Faculty Senate

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NEWARK – The University of Delaware Faculty Senate approved a new educational program for campus residence halls today.

The 45-7 vote in favor of endorsing the new, multi-pronged proposal came after months of work and debate sparked by criticism that the former program was forced on students and stifled their rights to free speech.

Debate by the Senate stretched over several hours and two meetings. Students for and against the program were present at both gatherings, the first of which was last Monday. They carried signs and handouts for faculty members who had a say in the outcome.

But proponents and opponents agreed that the real test of the proposal begins next fall, when students move into their dorm rooms and the implementation and assessment process begins.

"I think now the obligation is to ensure what was endorsed is implemented," said Matt Robinson, chairman of the Faculty Senate Student Life Committee. "That's on everyone at the university to make sure that happens."

The former program was canceled in November following public complaints. Parents and faculty brought the curriculum to the attention of Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. The group monitors freedom of speech issues on campuses nationally.

The Faculty Senate's Student Life Committee was charged with gathering input and drafting a new program. Ideas were culled from a forum in November and brainstorming during winter session with staff and students.

Goals outlined in the proposed new program include "exploring personal skills, values, traits and attitudes;" "recognizing how history, background and culture affect one's perspectives;" and "understanding [students'] own and others concept of justice."

Activities suggested in the program include discussions of current events and career planning.

Much of the debate on the program's merits, however, focused on efforts to promote sustainability. The plan's preparers say the term refers only to promoting conservation efforts such as recycling and limiting consumption of water and electricity.

In response to questions and concerns posed at last week's meeting, the word "environmental" was added to precede all mentions of sustainability in the document.

Some of the faculty's concerns regarding that issue were that Residence Life Director Kathleen Kerr has given talks at venues off-campus that define "sustainability" as also concerning social justice and economics.

Critics of the old plan said students felt forced to take part in activities. A statement stressing

the new program's voluntary nature – in bold-faced, underlined and italicized type – was added to the proposal after last week's discussion.

All students living in the dorm will be sent a letter to inform them that almost all of the activities included in the plan are optional. The only exceptions are semester-opening floor meetings that relate to safety procedures and the student code of conduct, Vice President for Student Life Michael Gilbert said.

Gilbert said changes have been made to training for residence life staff and that staff will be subject to more oversight. A new assistant vice president is being hired specifically to oversee day-to-day operations of the residence halls.

The new plan will also be subject to a mid-school year assessment by the Faculty Senate, which is already scheduled to discuss the program's progress at its February 2009 meeting. Robinson said the assessment will include seeking opinions from resident assistants and students living in the dorms.

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