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Editorial: Bible study is speech

From the Journal Sentinel

Posted: Nov. 13, 2005

It is not true that officials at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire will be conducting room checks to make sure that students aren't reading their Bibles or the Qur'an on state property; nor will those officials be conducting bed checks to make sure the kids aren't praying before they close their eyes to sleep. But officials are doing something almost as silly by enforcing a non-written policy barring resident assistants from holding religious or political activities in the dorms where they work, even when those activities take place on the students' own time.

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Lance Steiger, a senior at UW-Eau Claire, ran afoul of school authorities because last year, he and a group of friends gathered in the basement of his dormitory for Bible study sessions. In July, he received a letter from the school telling him that if he did not cease, he would face disciplinary action.

Apparently the biggest issue is that Steiger conducted the sessions on school property. "R.A.s are free to engage in these activities as long as they are not doing it in an environment where they have supervisory roles over other students," according to school spokesman Mike Rindo.

The problem is that there is no such place. Students don't just seek advice from R.A.s when they're in the dorm. They talk to R.A.s at lunch, over coffee and at the local bars. If the university's contention is that being an R.A. is a 24/7 kind of job, that applies no matter where the R.A. is when she or he is asked a question by a student.

But the university draws an artificial line at the dormitory door. It's a line that won't hold.

If Steiger held the Bible sessions at the local coffee shop, students would still know that he's an R.A. It seems to be an absolutely silly requirement to force Steiger and his friends to take their Bible session to that coffee shop or into the parking lot of a neighboring dorm.

As long as Steiger isn't using his position of authority to foist his religious views on others or trying to compel attendance at the sessions, the university shouldn't be interfering in Steiger's expression of his private religious beliefs with his friends on his own time. And the same would

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apply if Steiger were a Muslim or a Jew or a Wiccan - or a Republican or Democrat, for that matter.

The R.A. is allowed some free time in his place of residence, even if that place of residence is a taxpayer-funded dormitory. And R.A.s, just as others on campus, should be accorded the room to exercise their beliefs.

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The university should back off its policy.

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