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## UD panel to decide on residence life program

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A Faculty Senate committee will review plans today for fall 2008 residence hall programs at the University of Delaware, where officials last fall canceled a 4-year-old program critics said stifled free speech, attempted to indoctrinate students and put too much responsibility in the hands of resident assistants.

The faculty's Student Life Committee, which spent several months reviewing the controversial Residence Life program, rejected it last week. In its report, the committee emphasized that student participation should be voluntary, recommended that qualified professionals and faculty facilitate some discussions, and urged increased monitoring of all such efforts.

The dorm-based Residence Life sessions -- conducted in one-on-one meetings between students and resident assistants and in group settings -- were designed to improve understanding among diverse students, educate them on social issues and get them to think about citizenship.

But some students said they were uncomfortable in some discussions and were forced to reveal opinions they preferred to keep private or had no opportunity to explain. Questions about their sexual identities or their views on issues such as affirmative action and gay marriage made some squirm. Others said they were made to feel like racists because they were white. Some said they believed a political agenda was behind the sessions.

Annapolis businessman Peter Johnson was the first parent to object to the program. He did so after asking his son, Timmy, to tell him about the diversity training programs he had attended during his first month at UD. After hearing his son's accounts, Johnson contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based group that monitors free speech issues on the nation's campuses.

He tried to get copies of the materials used in the program, but said he had difficulty doing so.

"They were collecting the paperwork after training sessions were over," he said, "and not wanting to share it. This means they're not proud of their program and makes it look like they have something to hide."

Johnson said he persevered, got the training materials and passed them along to FIRE, which posted them on its Web site, demanded that the program be discontinued and stirred public debate.

New UD President Patrick Harker shelved the Residence Life program Nov. 1 and called for a full review, a job that fell to the Faculty Senate's seven-member Student Life Committee, chaired by Matthew Robinson. Robinson, director of UD's sports management program, said the committee did a thorough evaluation.

Today, the committee will review proposals to replace the Residence Life program in fall 2008.

Committee members worked with Michael Gilbert, vice president for student life, and Kathleen Kerr, director of UD's Office of Residence Life. Their proposals may reach the full Faculty Senate for approval by next month.

"We're addressing the needs of our students," Robinson said. "We're respecting their individuality and differences of opinion. ... And the process reconfirmed to me that UD is a great institution. We're not perfect, but it's a test of a great institution, recognizing that we made a mistake and saying, hey, there's something done here that can be done better. We're taking it as an opportunity to get better."

UD junior Casey Patriarco, president of the Student Government Association, spent hours during UD's winter session providing feedback to the faculty's Student Life Committee, adding a student's perspective to the discussion and helping develop recommendations for next year's programs.

"I've seen some very positive conversations develop between Residence Life and other professors and people in charge of the first-year experience," she said. "This is tying departments together and everything is coming together on a broader scale. We're refocusing residence life on some of the more traditional elements -- like providing resources for students, directing and referring them to the right places and doing basic resolution of roommate conflicts -- those traditional things are becoming more prominent."

Jan Blits, a professor in UD's honors program, was an outspoken opponent of the residence hall sessions. The changes proposed for 2008 are superficial, he said. He believes UD officials should remove the leaders of the Residence Life program.

"They're still talking about what could be called 'soulcraft' -- shaping the soul," he said. "From what I know of the proposals, they are attempts to shape the beliefs, characters and actions of the students, not simply give them a traditional residence life program -- what to do if there's noise in the hall, safety, courtesy in the buildings. Instead, they want to educate. The language has been somewhat softened, but from what I understand the substance is the same."

Blits continues to object to the "speech code" he says is used at UD, too, and says students still can be punished for speech considered offensive. That, he said, violates free-speech protections.

"Threats are illegal," Blits said. "But students can also get into serious trouble for saying things that could give offense. You can't punish a student as a behavior problem if the speech is legal."

Johnson's son has since transferred to the University of Maryland. The Residence Life program was only one of the reasons, Johnson said.

"Why spend twice as much on a college when I can't trust them?" Johnson said. The university should keep a traditional focus in its residence hall programs, he said.

"They should be throwing pizza parties, not trying to politically educate these people," he said.

Gilbert said the university made the right decision to cancel the former program. It will not return, he said. But work is under way to ensure that students have continuing opportunities to discuss issues of importance together.

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