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THIS STORY

UW president speaks up on Bible study controversy

Resident assistants should be allowed to lead sessions, Reilly says

By MEGAN TWOHEY
mtwohey@journalsentinel.com

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Madison - Kevin Reilly, president of the University of Wisconsin System, weighed in Tuesday on a policy at UW-Eau Claire prohibiting resident assistants from leading religious and political activities in their dorms, saying he believed the assistants should be allowed to do "anything they want" in their dorms as long they don't coerce other students.

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It was the first time Reilly gave his opinion of the policy, which has inspired much controversy since resident assistant Lance Steiger complained publicly this fall that he had been ordered to stop hosting Bible study in his dorm.

UW- Eau Claire

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Two weeks ago, in the face of mounting criticism, Reilly announced that his office would craft a new system-wide policy. His

comments Tuesday offered a hint of what the policy might be.

"I'm inclined to take a Wisconsin common-sense approach to this," Reilly said at a legislative hearing called by Rep. Rob Kreibich (R-Eau Claire), one of several legislators who view UW-Eau Claire's policy as a violation of resident assistants' free speech rights. "It seems resident assistants should be able to do anything they want as long as it's legal and ethical, as long as other students don't feel coerced, and that in doing those activities, they remain approachable."

But Reilly cautioned that turning opinion into policy could be difficult. The hard part, he said, is defining what constitutes coercion.

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Resident assistants at UW-Eau Claire receive free room and board and a stipend of \$675 a semester in exchange for nurturing and counseling dorm residents. Many students who have had a resident assistant lead Bible study said they didn't feel pressure to join. But some students said they did feel coerced. When one student declined an invitation during his freshman year to participate in his resident assistant's Bible study, the assistant responded by buying him a Bible.

"We encourage students to develop and grow in their own way," Reilly said. "There is a difference, however, between inquiry and recruitment."

The state Assembly committee on colleges and universities also heard from Steiger, a senior who describes himself as an evangelical. He received a letter from housing officials last summer saying he would face disciplinary action if he continued to lead Bible study in his dorm.

He said university housing officials knew that he led Bible study in his dorm because he put it on his application to be a resident assistant and discussed it during his interview. No one told him that he was prohibited from leading religious or political activities in the dorm, he said, and he maintains he never pushed students to participate.

Steiger, who is suing UW-Eau Claire and the UW System Board of Regents in federal court, told lawmakers he felt compelled to fight out of fear of what other restrictions the university would enforce.

"My big question is - what's next?" Steiger said. "Next year, is it going to be - you can't have a Bible on your desk?"

His testimony drew the support of many committee members.

"We have a lot of educated people leading the university who are making very bad choices," said Rep. Stephen Nass (R-Whitewater), a vocal critic of the UW System. "RAs get together with gays and lesbians or anti-war supporters. It's amazing that those are OK. But if someone wants to fold hands in prayer, it's prohibited."

"This is a David and Goliath story," Nass said. "You are David, and you're going to win."

Rep. Gregg Underheim (R-Oshkosh) said resident assistants should be allowed to express themselves in their dorms without restriction.

"Whatever the new policy is, the objective should be to expose students to as many ideas as possible," Underheim said. "If there's a communist party cell that wants to meet in a dorm basement, so be it."

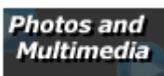
The committee also heard from U.S. Rep. Mark Green (R-Wis.). Green, who is seeking the Republican nomination in the upcoming governor's race, has been among the most vocal critics of the UW-Eau Claire policy. Reilly said the UW System would determine the new policy early next year.

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