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THE BADGER HERALD

NEWS

Satire back on track at UW-La Crosse

by Dan Powell

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The University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Student Association withdrew its resolution to limit the distribution of a satirical student publication last week following a controversy over First Amendment rights.

“We were never trying to stifle First Amendment rights or stop The Second Supper Alternative News from distributing on campus,” Ryan Kockler and AJ Clauss, president and vice president of UW-L’s Student Association, said in a release. “Our concerns stem from the fact that we know that directly and indirectly students, faculty and staff have been hurt by the language the paper publishes.”

The Second Supper has been under scrutiny since its release of a Feb. 28 article satirizing Vice President Dick Cheney’s hunting accident, entitled “Cheney Kills Five Crips in Inner-City Hunting Accident.”

“We wrote an article, like the Onion, that makes [Cheney] out to be a gangster thug,” Joe Gullo, editor in chief and founder of The Second Supper, said. “And he uses the ‘n’ word to describe other fellow Crip members.”

Following concern from students, the Student Association passed a resolution that limited the publication’s distribution from 2,000 to 60. A later resolution limited distribution to 900.

“We are a student organization, so we have the right to distribute on campus,” Gullo said. “We filed an appeal in Student Court and spent a lot of time looking into old archives cases and found we had all kinds of backing.”

Second Supper also received national support from the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a nonprofit educational foundation that defends free speech and other individual rights at all national colleges and universities.

FIRE sent a letter to UW-L Chancellor Douglas Hastad April 13, criticizing the university for “a disturbing lack of respect for students’ freedom of expression.”

“Parody and satire — even when they include ‘offensive’ language — are forms of political speech that are at the core of our country’s honored traditions,” FIRE Vice President Robert Shibley wrote in the letter. “No campus that claims to take seriously the free-speech rights of students may retaliate against a student publication because some students were offended by fully protected speech.”

Cary Heyer, director of university relations at UW-L, said the student government has authority over student organizations and added it took a position in the best interest of students.

“Speech that directs hatred or ill will is unsavory and not becoming of a student publication,” he said.

But Heyer said the university would never take a position that did not allow conversation on free speech to happen.

“Any organization that provides an opportunity for students to learn, in this case about the journalistic process, that is a good thing,” Heyer added. “As a university, we look to advance that.”

Yet Donald Downs, a UW-Madison political science professor, said the cutting of circulation by the Student Association restricted conversation and was almost as bad as full censorship.

“If a student government gives out money to various groups, then it can’t have content control,” Downs said. “It becomes a public forum type thing — and then the speaker has the freedom to say anything that isn’t against the law.”

Heyer echoed Downs’ concern for protecting legal speech, though the university did not have direct authority in the case.

“The bottom line is: does the university agree with all of the content in The Second Supper? No,” Heyer said. “But do we agree to have the opportunity for students to express their opinion? Yes, of course.”

The Second Supper has now returned to full circulation. Members of the UW-L Student Association could not be reached as of press time.