

OPINION & EDITORIAL

UW advances own political agenda

by Darryn Beckstrom

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Student speech codes were supposed to be a thing of the past on this campus. But sometimes the causes of repression continue to rear their problematic heads — often in a different form.

Last semester, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire resident assistant Lance Steiger sued his college and the UW System in federal court — and rightfully so — for violating his First Amendment rights to free expression and freedom of religion after prohibiting him from leading Bible studies in his room.

The controversy began when Mr. Steiger was sent a letter last summer stating that his actions were in violation of university policy.

In addition to notifying him that he was violating policy, UW-Eau Claire Associate Director of Housing and Residence Life Deborah Newman stated in her letter to Mr. Steiger, “It is very important to us that these students still feel that they can turn to you in a crisis, for information, or for support and hopefully that they would not feel judged or pushed in a direction that does not work for them.”

While Mr. Steiger was engaging in these Bible studies, other RAs also engaged in actions the policy supposedly prohibited, including the sponsoring of “The Vagina Monologues” on campus. But only Mr. Steiger was told to cease his activity.

Somehow tales of feminism, sexual liberation and postmodern political thought give me the willies and push me “in a direction that does not work” for me. What do you say about that Ms. Newman? Students need to realize that college is preparation for the real world. There is a constitutional right to freedom of religion and expression, but there is no constitutional protection to feel “comfortable.”

Unfortunately, because of the selective enforcement of the policy, UW-Eau Claire has sent a strong message that certain political statements and “The Vagina Monologues” are protected speech — while the Bible is not.

An institution of higher education — and a supposed “marketplace of ideas” — should be the last place where administrators selectively enforce a policy based on their political agenda.

While much attention has focused on the housing policy at UW-Eau Claire, this problem hits closer to home. UW-Madison has a similar RA policy against holding Bible studies, which the administration has been steadfast in defending. I originally believed this university was just plain ignorant of the basic principles of the First Amendment. But then I sought out a more plausible explanation — discrimination.

This wouldn't be the first time institutions within the UW System have slammed the door on Christianity while embracing other ideas such as sexual liberation. Last semester, the University of Wisconsin Roman Catholic Foundation was repeatedly denied funding by the Student Services Finance Committee while other

organizations with religious affiliations such as the Jewish Cultural Coalition escaped the funding eligibility process unscathed.

The university gave a significant amount of funding to Sex Out Loud to fund “sexual facilitators” such as sex toys, porn, erotica, role-playing and S&M for students and dental dams for the Campus Women’s Center — all paid for by student segregated fees. But UWRCF had to vehemently fight to receive funding, including two appearances before the Student Judiciary.

Last December, UW System President Kevin Reilly announced he would form a committee to assess “the appropriate level of involvement of RAs in leading and organizing activities for students who live in the residence halls.”

Unfortunately, the committee charged with making recommendations regarding the RA policy — which was void of any student input — failed to produce any sound guidance or advice to the System.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Reilly has not decided when he will make a final decision on the RA Bible study ban. And don’t expect him to make a decision any time soon. If Mr. Reilly was genuinely interested in protecting the marketplace of ideas we have come to expect at an institution of UW’s caliber — regardless of the speech’s popularity — the unconstitutional ban would have already been lifted.

The committee punted the issue, and, unfortunately, Mr. Reilly is not there to catch to ball. Meanwhile, student freedoms are once again taking a backseat to political correctness on this campus.

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