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Diversity program creates division

Delaware freshmen unsettled.

By Kathy Boccella

Inquirer Staff Writer

When University of Delaware freshmen showed up at their dorms this semester, their orientation included an exercise aimed at bridging cultural divides.

But the program backfired after they were told to write down stereotypes of different ethnic and religious groups and publicly give their views on issues such as gay marriage and affirmative action.

"You have girls giving you hard looks because they're Jewish, and you just wrote something offensive, like they're cheap, even though you don't believe it," said Grace Banks, 18, of Smyrna. "It caused a lot of separations. . . . The whole situation was really uncomfortable."

Delaware's diversity training program is under scrutiny after students complained that they were pressed to adopt university-approved views on race and other sensitive topics, participate in squirm-inducing exercises, and rated on their responses to questions about their sexual and cultural beliefs.

Parents and professors also complained that the program is politically slanted, citing training material that claims all white people living in the United States are racist.

"It's straight-out indoctrination," said Linda Gottfredson, an education professor who looked into the program after her Honors Program students grumbled about it.

Another education professor, Jan Blits, president of the Delaware Association of Scholars, labeled the program "political propaganda and brain-washing."

"I'd be out of a job in a day if I asked students questions about their sex lives or their experiences as oppressors. . . . It's illegal," he said.

In a letter to Delaware president Patrick T. Harker, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based free-speech group, called the program a "threat to freedom of conscience" and asked that it be dismantled immediately.



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"The most terrifying thing is it's teaching a generation of students that it's OK to force people to believe what you believe, if you believe you're right, and that's not what a free society is supposed to be about," said FIRE president Greg Lukianoff.

Michael Gilbert, the university's vice president for student life, acknowledged "missteps" in the program, which is intended for the 7,000 students living in dormitories on the 970-acre Newark campus.

Among the problems Gilbert acknowledges: Resident advisers told students the sessions were mandatory when they were voluntary; the term "treatment" was used, which he said could be "easily misinterpreted" and "construed as inappropriate"; and students were rated "best and worst" by RAs after their one-on-one meetings.

Students "are not required to adopt any particular points of view but are presented with a range of ideas to challenge them and stimulate conversation and debate," Gilbert said in a posting on the university's Web site.

A few "overzealous" RAs told students they had to attend the meetings, he said. After students complained recently, they were informed last week that they did not have to attend.

As for the prying sex question, Gilbert said the exercise was intended to help students "reflect on a number of things" and to become "critical thinkers," and would continue.

If a student declines to answer "our obligation is to accept that and respect that," he said.

An RA who asked that he not be identified for fear of being fired said he was so uncomfortable asking students about sex and race in the one-one-ones that he never did it.

"It's an insane thing to ask," he said.

During the interviews, which are held twice a semester, staff evaluate students on their "level of change or acceptance," he said.

Gilbert said the only ratings were of RA interview skills.

The senior, who is in his second year as an RA, said: "There's very little dialogue. It's very much a monologue.

"They call it diversity, but what it really is acceptance of a specific set of dogma," the student said.

The 20,000-student brick-and-ivy school, which started as a private academy in 1743, is overwhelmingly white, 83 percent; African American, 5.3 percent; Hispanic 4.4 percent; and Asian, 3.8 percent.

There are few racial problems on campus, according to students and administrators. The diversity program was started, Gilbert said, to help students become "active and successful citizens" of the world.

Topics such as internalized and institutional racism, diversity, and environmental and social justice are taught at various dorms.

Materials from an August 2007 training session for Whole New World included articles that described a racist as "one who is both privileged and socialized on the basis of race by a white supremacist (racist) system. The term applies to all white people (i.e., people of European descent) living in the

United States . . . "

Another article said "white culture is a melting pot of greed, guys, guns and god. It is a deadly brew."

Gilbert said those were not the university's views and should not have been posted on the school's Web site without some "context." The material is among "thousands" of documents used to teach the course, he said.

Other articles on the Web site included the confessions of a "recovering racist" and a list of the daily effects of "white privilege."

Students said they felt pressured by RAs to agree with an ideology in which whites were oppressors and minorities were victims.

"It made me feel that because I was white and not at the lower economic spectrum of society, I was in some way racist, when in reality I do not think differently of anyone because of their race or gender or sexual identity," said Brooke Aldrich, 18, who lives in Russell Hall dorm.

In one exercise, she said students had to go to different sides of the room if they agreed or disagreed with statements about gay marriage or affirmative action.

"You had to take a stance, yes or no. There were no gray areas. It was very uncomfortable," Aldrich said.

In another session, students had to step forward or backward depending on their response to statements about race and sexual identity. Those who ended up at the front were supposed to be white males, which they were told were the least oppressed members of society, she said.

Kelsey Lanan, 19, a sophomore, said, "It seemed like they were trying to convince us we were racist and sexist and were horrible people."

For many students, the worst was the one-on-one meetings in which they were given a sheet of questions such as, "When were you first made aware of your race?" and "When did you discover your sexual identity?"

Matthew King, 19, said that when he asked his RA if he could skip the question on sexuality, she said, "I'm really going to need you to answer it."

They sat in silence until he wrote something down.

One student identified in a write-up as an RA's "worst" was a young woman who said she was tired of having "diversity shoved down her throat" and that the questions that were being asked were nobody's business.

Another "worst" student who was angry about the program was said to be "very set in her ways - to the point of annoyance."

A parent of a biracial boy said he found the program "very disturbing" and was hesitant about keeping his son at Delaware.

Peter Johnson's 18-year-old son told him there was pressure to agree that "all white people are the committers of racial oppression and everybody else is a victim."

He said he was stonewalled when he asked the school for program materials but when he insisted,

he received them.

An RA who is Latina, Lorraine Makond, agreed that the program was a flop because students didn't really want to be there.

"For the most part students put up a wall," said the 19-year-old junior, who is president of the Latino student union. "When people hear diversity training, they put their politically correct sensors on for three hours, then go back to their regular behavior."

One-on-One Sample Questions The University of Delaware's student diversity training required freshmen to meet one on one with dorm resident advisers to answer these questions and others. The university says the program was voluntary, but students in some dorms were told it was mandatory.

1. When were you first made aware of your race?
 2. When did you discover your sexual identity?
 3. Who taught you a lesson in regard to some sort of diversity awareness? What was that lesson?
 4. When was a time when you confronted someone regarding an issue of diversity? What was the confrontation about? If haven't, why not?
 5. When was a time you felt oppressed? Who was oppressing you? How did you feel?
 6. Can you think of a time when someone was offended by what you said? How did that make you feel? How do you think it made them feel? How did his/her behavior change toward you?
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