

NEWS

Eau Claire suspends

Bible-study ban

by Michael Gendall

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The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire announced Wednesday it will suspend its controversial Bible-study ban, effective immediately.

Plagued by sharp legislative criticism for nearly a month, the university will no longer adhere to an oral policy prohibiting resident assistants from leading Bible studies and other ideological activities, pending the completion of a UW System review.

UW-Madison, however, will stick by its policy, at least for the time being. It is the only other UW school confirmed to enforce such a ban.

"I think it's a good policy. It's very viewpoint-neutral," UW-Madison Housing Director Paul Evans said. "The house fellow position is a very unique position, and I think we need to be careful about what kinds of things they might be leading on their floor."

Early Wednesday, legislative furor over the UW System's hesitance to condemn the policy reached a new high when Rep. Rob Kreibich, R-Eau Claire, announced his plans to hold a hearing on the matter and vowed to invite officials from both UW-Eau Claire and the UW System to testify.

"I'd love to see the UW System lawyers defend the Madison policy," he said. "It has battered the system's image around the world, [and] we're anticipating just an overwhelming media [presence]."

Kreibich also invited UW-Eau Claire student Lance Steiger, the RA who launched the ordeal with his complaint to the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education this summer, as well as U.S. Rep. Mark Green, R-Wis.

"I am pleased that Rep. Kreibich has taken this step, and I think it will be a good chance for the Legislature and really the taxpayers [to discuss the issue]," Green said. "These hearings are especially important in light of the attorney general's unwillingness to issue an opinion. I think the UW System is opening itself up to a tremendous liability, certainly opening itself up to ridicule."

Following Kreibich's announcement, UW System President Kevin Reilly announced the formation of an advisory committee to make recommendations for a system-wide policy on what privileges should be granted to resident assistants or, in the case of UW-Madison, house fellows.

Green, a 2006 Wisconsin gubernatorial candidate, has consistently criticized the UW System for its handling of the controversy, frequently calling for Reilly to abolish a policy he has deemed unwise, unconstitutional and "un-American."

"To be honest, I'm not very impressed," Green, upon learning of the new committee, said. "The issue is very simply whether or not we should, as a university system, take away the free speech. They don't need to create a bureaucratic committee. This doesn't require special expertise."

Although the UW System and UWEC have been in close contact throughout the ordeal, the decision to suspend the policy was apparently made independently by UW-Eau Claire Interim Chancellor Vicki Lord Larson.

“The decision to suspend was made as a result of what we learned in our internal review,” UWEC spokesperson Mike Rindo said. “The prohibitions that have been in effect, which are longstanding prohibitions, have been suspended ... pending the completion of a review.”

While the UW-Madison policy is in writing, Rindo said the UWEC version is oral and “decades old.”

“It’s better late than never, I guess,” Kreibich said. “I don’t understand why it couldn’t have been settled three weeks ago, before it blew up into an international story.”

Kreibich said the announcement of Reilly’s committee earlier in the day only strengthens his resolve for the hearing, which will be held at the Capitol Dec. 14.

“We’re going to withhold judgment until we see what this committee produces,” he said, vowing to ask the tough questions of UW System lawyers and President Kevin Reilly. “We will grill them at length about the constitutionality of the policies that are in place, written and oral.”

According to UW System spokesperson Kate Dixon, the new committee will consist of campus student-life experts appointed by each of the UW chancellors. The campus representatives will be named by Dec. 9 and will be allotted one month to prepare recommendations.

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