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THIS STORY

Bible study conflict escalates to national issue

Amid rancor, UW-Eau Claire students show little concern

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Eau Claire - Last month, the interim chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire hastily called a meeting of her executive staff. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education had just contacted her to complain that a resident assistant named Lance Steiger had been banned from hosting Bible study in his dorm. The chancellor sensed imminent controversy.

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across the state and around the country. Legislators, including U.S. Rep. Mark Green (R-Wis.), joined the national foundation in lambasting the policy as a violation of resident assistants' freedom of speech and religion, while a Madison group called the Freedom from Religion Foundation insisted the policy was necessary and correct.

The conflict heated up Wednesday when a Christian law firm from Arizona filed a federal lawsuit, on behalf of Steiger, against UW-Eau Claire and the UW Board of Regents and Larson suspended the policy pending further review.

"I told them this will become very big, very fast," the chancellor, Vicki Lord Larson, recalled of the meeting.

Within days, word of a UW-Eau Claire policy prohibiting resident assistants from hosting religious and political activities in their dorm had spread off campus,

UW- Eau Claire
Quotable
<p>“ If you went up to any student and asked, ‘Has this been going on?’ the answer would be yes. If you asked ‘Is this a problem?’ the answer would be no. ”</p> <p>- Brian Reisinger, an editor of the student newspaper, who has been covering the story</p>
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Missing from the heated debate has been the voice of UW-Eau Claire students.

During a recent visit to campus, the Journal Sentinel found evidence to suggest that most students support the right of resident assistants to lead Bible studies in their dorms. Students said the practice has been prevalent for years. Some linked it to the growing popularity of Christian organizations on campus.

"If you went up to any student and asked, 'Has this been going on?' the answer would be yes," said Brian Reisinger, an editor of the student newspaper, who has been covering the story as it has spiraled into a national controversy. "If you asked 'Is this a problem?' the answer would be no."

Larson agreed. She has spoken with dozen of students through e-mail, phone calls, and a recent roundtable discussion that drew 80 participants. She said only two have told her they support the ban.

"Without a doubt, the majority of students would like to see the policy suspended permanently," Larson said of the ban.

Campus housing officials at UW-Eau Claire maintain that resident assistants have been prohibited from leading religious or political activities in the dorms for decades, Larson said.

But Reisinger and other students said certain resident assistants have been leading Bible studies in the dorms for years. Two in Reisinger's freshman dorm did. There's another resident assistant in Steiger's dorm who leads a group.

"There are tons of RAs who lead Bible studies," said Beth Ellison, a sophomore who serves as a resident assistant in Steiger's dorm, Governors Hall.

"It's always been common in the dorms," said Steven Grahmann, who graduated from UW-Eau Claire in 2000.

Grahmann now works as a full-time staff member of Intervarsity, one of several Christian ministries on campus that have grown increasingly popular in recent years. When Grahmann was a freshman, Intervarsity had around 50 members. Today, it has more than 200, he said.

A similar group called The Navigators has grown from 50 students to 120 students in the last seven years, while an organization called Student Impact boasts around 170 members, including Steiger.

These organizations say that it's not unusual for their members to become resident assistants as a way to help and guide other students. They encourage resident assistants and other members to conduct Bible studies in their dorm as a way to foster intimate conversations about faith.

"We've found that we draw participants when we focus on small groups, especially in the dorms where students live," Grahmann said.

Norman Hubbard, a national staff representative for The Navigators, said officials may be reading too much into the practice.

"We don't encourage our students to be RAs as part of some sort of strategy, but I wonder if the administration worries that there's a hostile takeover in the works, a design by Christian students to take over housing and resident life."

Many students with a resident assistant who conducts a Bible study said it doesn't bother them.

Sophomore Patrick Brian participated in Steiger's group last year and found it to be a nice way to meet students who shared his Christian values.

Freshman D.J. Huenerbein, who lives on the dorm wing that Steiger oversees this year, said he felt comfortable declining when Steiger asked him if he would like to join.

But not everyone is supportive.

Senior Jacob Boer said that when he declined an invitation to participate in his resident assistant's Bible study freshman year, the resident assistant responded by buying him a Bible. He said the incident made him feel alienated from the resident assistant and uncomfortable around him.

"I know I'm in the minority," Boer said. "But I think resident assistants have to be as neutral and approachable as possible."

Resident assistants at the university receive free room and board and a \$675-per-semester stipend in exchange for nurturing and counseling dorm residents.

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