Campus News

University suspends policy

Committee will recommend System-wide RA rules by Jan. 9

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UW-Eau Claire has suspended its unwritten policy that places restrictions on resident assistants until it and the UW System complete their reviews.

The suspension, which Interim Chancellor Vicki Lord Larson announced Wednesday during her Roundtable discussion, took effect immediately because of inconsistencies found by the internal review in regard to the communication of the policy to RAs during training.

"The suspension indicates that we recognize that our lack of written guidelines has caused confusion and controversy for some people," Larson said.

During the review, System President Kevin Reilly requested the university enforce the policy only if complaints are received about specific conduct by specific RAs, Larson said.

Reilly also announced the formation of a student-life experts committee that will help develop System-wide policies for all RAs on UW campuses. Chancellors of each university will name individuals to the committee by Dec. 9. The committee will then forward all recommendations for future policies by Jan. 9.

"We have been getting increasing criticism from legislators and others that we don't respond fast enough," Larson said, adding the time between those two dates indicates the System's desire to respond to this issue quickly.

The policy forbids RAs from organizing or leading religious, political, or sales-related activities in their room or residence halls.

Senior RA Lance Steiger first received a letter on July 26 asking him to refrain from holding Bible studies in his residence hall.

Steiger attempted to speak with housing officials, but said they denied him, which prompted him to contact the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. FIRE sent a letter to Larson Oct. 10 and the issue later received national attention.

"I was happy to hear that they suspended the policy. It's good to hear that the university is listening to its students," Steiger said. "I still disagree with any policy that limits RAs from leading religious, political, ideological or anything of the sort in their free time."

Chuck Major, director of housing and residence life, said the policy never took a written form because these issues rarely arose. Over the course of his 30 years in housing, Major said he's seen incidents like these occur a few times.

Other universities do not have this policy in writing either, he said, with Madison as the only exception. According to its policy, RAs cannot hold any meetings in their rooms or residence halls.

"We want to stop and review this thing," he said. "If we're going to have (a policy), we're going to have it in writing."

Junior RA Angela Rattray said RAs are leadership-oriented people, and forbidding these activities creates a problem. As for the suspension, she said it was a wise move by Larson.

"It's a very wise decision especially because so many people are so unsure of what to do," Rattray said. "I just hope that they continue to listen to the students' voice."

The students' voice became an issue of concern for senior Jeff Baldovin. Because the committee will have all their proposed policies by Jan. 9, it does not give students a chance to voice their concerns because of winter break.

"I'm somewhat concerned that the committee's going to make recommendations when students aren't here," Baldovin said. "I

just think this is a policy that isn't right."

Interim Provost Steve Tallant said it would be favorable to solve this issue on a local level, but the national media coverage and its complexity begs for it to be addressed by the System.

"I don't think the UW System has a choice but to intervene here," Tallant said. "I think this is the way it needs to be handled."

Senior RA Noah Haas said since this issue is in the System's hands, students should exercise trust in the system, especially because of the issue's legality.

"I don't think there are people out there that are trying to maliciously take away student rights," Haas said. "We kind of just have to trust the process."

On Monday in Altoona's City Hall, area legistators Rep. Rob Kreibich, R-Eau Claire, and Rep. Scott Suder, R-Abbotsford, held a listening session to gain opinions from Eau Claire residents regarding Eau Claire's policy. Some solutions from the legislators included posting office hours on RA's doors, verbally placing disclaimers on meetings and a consistent system wide policy.

For the remainder of the semester, Larson said the suspension was the best thing to do in order for the university to focus on its main goal - to give students the best education possible.

"I'm here because I want to see all of you walk across the stage," she said. "I hope that we can move forward."

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