

THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

Students

[Home](#) [News](#) [Administration](#) [Students](#)

November 16, 2007

U. of Delaware Abandons Sessions on Diversity

By ERIC HOOVER

Effort to teach tolerance in dormitories attacked as 'thought reform'

The University of Delaware spent years refining its residence-life education program. One week of public criticism unraveled it.

Late last month, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a free-speech group, accused the university of promoting specific views on race, sexuality, and morality in a series of discussions held in dormitories. The program was designed to build understanding among diverse students, but some participants complained that it told them how to think and pried into their beliefs with questions like "When did you discover your sexual identity?"

In an October 29 letter to Delaware's president, the group, known as FIRE, called the program "systematic thought reform" and urged the university to suspend it. Three days later, Delaware complied.

FIRE declared victory over an "Orwellian" social experiment, but the story of Delaware's program is about more than wins and losses. The conflict shows the difficulty of promoting meaningful discussions outside the classroom at a time when some student-affairs departments are trying to play a larger role in learning than ever before.

For decades, residence-life programs have organized group sessions on racism, sexism, and homophobia. Research shows those exercises can help broaden students' cultural awareness and diminish negative perceptions of others — forms of student "engagement" that can promote learning.

Some researchers, however, have found that such programs consistently benefit white students more than nonwhite ones.

Yet many colleges mistakenly believe that diversity plus interaction equals a panacea, according to Shaun R. Harper, an assistant professor of higher-education management at the University of Pennsylvania. "It's still very much the case that we dump 15,000 students in a residence hall," Mr. Harper says, "and expect that they're going to magically interact and learn from each other."

Mr. Harper edited a forthcoming book called *Creating Inclusive Campus Environments*, published by NaspA — Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. In the first chapter, he contends that student-affairs departments tend to leave cross-cultural learning to chance, relying on informal programs, such as ice breakers and "fun exercises with short-lived opportunities for processing."

To spark more-meaningful experiences of diversity, he believes, student-affairs professionals should mimic the methods of instructors: create a formal curriculum, link it to desired educational results, and develop an assessment plan. A syllabus, in other words, for out-of-classroom learning.

"It's a paradigmatic shift," he says, "to something more educational, intentional, and deliberate."

Beyond Pizza

Delaware has already made that shift. Residence-life officials there first discussed a "curricular approach" more than a decade ago. Ultimately they developed a detailed plan for promoting citizenship ("understanding how your thoughts, values, beliefs, and actions affect the people with whom you live") among some 7,000 dorm residents.

In a 2006 article in *About Campus* magazine, Kathleen G. Kerr and James Tweedy, Delaware's director and associate director of residence life, respectively, described their program's evolution. Previously, they wrote, though the university "knew motivating students to attend programming by providing pizza increased attendance, we did not know whether or how that programming affected learning."

And so they developed an educational framework that included 28 "competencies" for students (residents were asked to demonstrate the ability to "self-reflect" as freshmen, for example, and the "reciprocal nature of community" as juniors). Resident assistants used sequenced lesson plans as guides for group discussions and one-on-one meetings with students. Assessments of the program's effectiveness relied on students' own reflections, surveys, and interviews. "We find ourselves on an entirely new playing field," Ms. Kerr and Mr. Tweedy wrote of the program, "with fresh enthusiasm and fresh mistakes."

Some of those mistakes were big ones, according to several students and resident assistants who say they disliked the program long before FIRE's letter.

Bill Rivers, a sophomore, says the sessions delved too deeply into students' heads. In one session during his freshman year, a resident assistant read statements about abortion, gay marriage, and affirmative action. After each one, students were supposed to stand against one of two walls, under signs that said "Agree" or "Disagree." There was no middle ground.

Mr. Rivers, a member of the College Republicans, says he supports diversity in all forms. He cites interactions and debates with Democrats as rewarding experiences. But by forcing students into discussions, he says, the residence-life program caused as much tension as it eased.

"It's bullying," says Mr. Rivers. "There's no educational justification for RA's asking you these questions. It's not their job."

Promoting Citizenship

Many student-affairs professionals believe their job is to promote citizenship and tolerance among students. The trick is tailoring programs to the needs and moods of students at a particular moment, says Jonathan Todd, residence director at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

"We don't force them to tackle certain things right away," Mr. Todd says. "Sometimes, a predominantly white school isn't ready to hear about racism and privilege."

The key to designing more-effective curricular programs may lie in restraint — finding the happy medium between pizza parties and group interrogations. After all, residence-life programs tend to express the beliefs of their creators.

"Some people have a hard time," says Greg Lukianoff, FIRE's president, "distinguishing between institutional values and having people subscribe to particular political beliefs."

Politics aside, the uproar at Delaware is also a debate about comfort. In an era when colleges may view students as customers to keep happy, how many are willing to make their students uncomfortable in the name of learning, even for a few minutes?

Michael A. Gilbert, Delaware's vice president for student life, believes the university has a responsibility to challenge students by exposing them to different perspectives and encouraging self-reflection. "If the balance is right, we come out of those experiences having learned something," he says.

Mr. Gilbert insists the residence-life program stopped well short of indoctrination, but he concedes it was flawed. For one, some

resident assistants had told students the sessions were mandatory. Mr. Gilbert says the university failed to "clarify fully" that the program was optional. And he said the university should not have posted on its Web site a guest speaker's list of definitions of racism, which said all white people in the United States were racists.

Mr. Gilbert plans to review the program with a faculty committee and recommend changes, though the residence-life department may not have the final word on what, if any, program replaces the old one. At a meeting of the University Faculty Senate last week, Delaware's provost, Dan Rich, said educating students, in and out of the classroom, was the responsibility of the faculty.

Some free-speech experts had a milder reaction to Delaware's program than FIRE did. Robert M. O'Neil, founding director of the Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression and a former president of the University of Virginia, believes as long as students know they can opt out of such activities without penalty, discussions of race, politics, and other sensitive issues can serve an educational purpose without running afoul of the First Amendment. "If the exposure to views ... different from those of other students makes you uncomfortable, that's unfortunate," Mr. O'Neil says. "But that doesn't mean the program is coercive."

<http://chronicle.com> Section: Students Volume 54, Issue 12, Page A1

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037