U. of Delaware Approves New Diversity Program for Students

By ERIC HOOVER

Six months after suspending its controversial dormitory-based diversity discussions, the University of Delaware has approved a plan to replace them with a new residence-life program.

Last week Delaware's Faculty Senate overwhelmingly voted for the plan, which was designed to promote "citizenship" among students. The program's activities, which are voluntary, are meant to encourage students "to become engaged and active citizens on campus by understanding how their thoughts, values, beliefs, and actions affect people with whom they live and by recognizing their citizenship responsibilities," an objective similar to the stated goal of the previous program.

Unlike its predecessor, however, the new program will have faculty oversight and will rely more on trained professionals — as opposed to resident assistants — to lead the discussions, according to Delaware officials. The university plans to regularly assess whether the program is meeting students' needs.

The new program will also emphasize student safety, personal development, and "cultural opportunities" on the campus. And it will encourage students to conserve resources, such as by recycling and taking shorter showers, in accordance with the university's commitment to sustainability.

Delaware's previous program had prompted great interest among residence-life professionals. Its "curricular approach" was an attempt to bring more structure to dorm-based discussions, a syllabus of sorts for out-of-classroom learning. The problem, by some accounts, was that group discussions often veered into doctrine.

Last year some students and professors complained that the program promoted specific views on race, sexuality, and morality. Bill Rivers, a sophomore, told The Chronicle in November that resident assistants forced students into uncomfortable discussions about divisive issues, such as abortion, gay marriage, and affirmative action. In some discussions, students were asked...
personal questions, including, "When did you discover your sexual identity?"

"It's bullying," Mr. Rivers said. "There's no educational justification for RA's asking you these questions."

In October the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia-based free-speech group, called the program "systematic thought reform" and urged the university to suspend it. Days later the president, Patrick T. Harker, did just that.

Delaware officials concede that the previous program had flaws. Perhaps the biggest was the university's failure to clarify that students' participation in the discussions was optional. Some resident assistants had told students otherwise.

'A Correct View'

When the new program begins this fall, the university will make sure students know they can opt out of any of the activities without penalty, said Matthew J. Robinson, chairman of the Faculty Senate's Committee on Student Life, which reviewed the previous program and made recommendations for the new one.

In February, Mr. Robinson's committee produced a report that identified several of the discontinued program's weaknesses. The panel found, for instance, "an inappropriate reliance on resident assistants in the implementation of the curriculum." The report also said the program's activities sometimes "suggested a particular view was a correct view over another rather than encouraging students to have an open and honest discussion."

The new plan recommends that the program be "reflective" and should emphasize "the student's own meaning making process." Resident assistants would function only as facilitators, and not as educators, according to faculty members who support the new plan.

Mr. Robinson believes that most students would welcome "higher level" discussions about cultural, social, and environmental issues in their dorms. "These are issues they want to talk about," said Mr. Robinson, who is an associate professor of sport management. "They don't want to be told what to think, but they do want to talk about them."

Last week's vote followed months of intense discussions at Delaware, where the dispute over the residence-life program had grown into a larger debate over questions like: Does a university have an obligation to promote tolerance among its students? Where is the line between education and indoctrination? What is the
proper definition of "citizenship"?

The vote did not settle those questions.

Jan H. Blits said the new program is full of uncertainties. "It strikes me as incoherent, and it's not clear what we've approved," said Mr. Blits, a professor in Delaware's honors program, who voted against the proposal. "There are several problems with this program. The most obvious is the way it defines citizenship. It sounds more like an attempt to transform the world socially, politically, and environmentally."

Mr. Harker, Delaware's president, said he was satisfied with the plan the faculty approved. In a statement posted on the university's Web site, he called the new program "vital to an engaged campus."