

## Sex, Lies, and Residence Life: Delaware's Thought Reform

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**Editor's Note:** *In light of the residence life scandal at the University of Delaware, the National Association of Scholars decided to take a closer look at other colleges and universities. Was Delaware an isolated case? We didn't believe so. Numerous clues suggested that what Delaware was doing was—and still is—happening at other institutions around the country. And thus in December 2007 How Many Delawares? was launched. With the assistance of NAS consultant Dr. Thomas Wood, the ongoing results of our inquiry into how ideological indoctrination has been smuggled into residence and student life programs, which rightfully should provide students with orderly and safe environments conducive to academic study, are posted on [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org).*

A female freshman arrives for her mandatory one-on-one session in her male RA's dorm room. It is 8:00 p.m. Classes have been in session for about a week. The resident assistant hands her a questionnaire. He tells her it is “a little questionnaire to help [you] and all the other residents relate to the curriculum.” He adds that they will “go through every question together and discuss them.” He later reports that she “looked a little uncomfortable.”

“When did you discover your sexual identity?” the questionnaire asks.

“That is none of your damn business,” she writes.

“When was a time you felt oppressed?”

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“I am oppressed every day [because of my] feelings for the opera. Regularly [people] throw stones at me and jeer me with cruel names....Unbearable adversity. But I will overcome, hear me, you rock loving majority.”<sup>1</sup>

She is not playing along like the other students, and the RA confronts her using his “confrontation training,” but it isn’t working. He becomes so appalled by her resistance that he writes up an incident report and reports her to his superiors. After all, this is the University of Delaware, and the school has a zero-tolerance policy for anything remotely resembling “hate speech.”

This one-on-one session was not meant to be a punishment, some kind of mandatory sensitivity training for a recalcitrant student who had committed an infraction. It was mandatory training for *all* 7,000-odd students in the University of Delaware dorms. The sessions were part of a thorough thought-reform curriculum, designed by the school’s Office of Residence Life, psychologically to “treat” and correct the allegedly incorrect thoughts, attitudes, values, beliefs, and habits of the students. The ResLife staff considered students too intolerant of one another, too “consumerist,” and in dire need of reeducation to become responsible world citizens who could meet the planet’s environmental crisis and the requirements of social and economic “justice.”

The reprogramming sessions had the trappings of cultism. After an investigation showed that males demonstrated “a higher degree of resistance to educational efforts,” one dorm chose to hire “strong male RAs.” Each such RA “combats male residents’ concepts of traditional male identity” in order to “ensure the delivery of the curriculum at the same level as in the female floors.” Mandatory group sessions singled out and shamed non-minority students because of their “privilege” in American society. Staff members kept individual files on students and their beliefs—which were to be archived after graduation. RAs were trained in the zero-tolerance policy against anything “oppressive”—an untoward word would trigger immediate notification of the campus police. RAs were required to report their “best” and “worst” one-on-one sessions to their superiors, including students’ names and room numbers. Posters and door decorations provided the ResLife messages everywhere; one could not escape them. One administrator of the program, Sindy Guerrier, wrote that students “should be confronted with this

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<sup>1</sup>All unattributed quotations come from University of Delaware documents archived at [www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org) except for personal accounts by students and an RA, which are personal communications between individuals and FIRE.

information at every turn.” Students with “traditional” beliefs had to become “allies” and “change agents” by their senior year.

All of this, according to the university's own materials, was part of a new educational model that had won awards from the American College Personnel Association's Commission for Social Justice Educators. The University of Delaware was proud of this “every student” model of values education in the residence halls, which had been implemented in 2004. This “curricular approach,” the university sang, was superior to the old “programming model,” which was merely voluntary and only focused on outmoded activities like study breaks. Finally, ResLife officials could be teachers of a mandatory program, just like the faculty, and they could reach students where it really mattered—where they lived. The program was a comprehensive manipulation of the living environment to inculcate, unrelentingly, the ideological messages insisted upon by the ResLife staff, an extreme example of what Alan Charles Kors and Harvey Silverglate had predicted ten years ago in *The Shadow University*: a large apparatus of Residence Life officials usurping the educational prerogatives of the faculty in order to advance a deeply repressive agenda.<sup>2</sup>

Recognizing what they called the “betrayal of liberty on America's campuses,” Kors and Silverglate established the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) in 1999. FIRE's mission (see [www.thefire.org](http://www.thefire.org)) is to defend and sustain individual rights at America's colleges and universities. These rights include freedom of speech, legal equality, due process, religious liberty, and—notably lacking at the University of Delaware—the right of private conscience.

Fortunately, indoctrination cannot bear the light of public scrutiny. Within days after FIRE exposed the program to the public in October 2007—and put all 500-odd pages of the “curriculum” documents online—the university's president, Patrick Harker, suspended it. But the many full-time ResLife staff worked nonstop to bring it back. Rather than repudiate the racist teachings and invasive methods of the program, some University of Delaware faculty even worked with the Office of Residence Life to reinstate the agenda.

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<sup>2</sup>Alan Charles Kors and Harvey Silverglate, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty On America's Campuses* (New York: Free Press, 1998).

## Hello, Mom? I'm a Racist!

The media focused heavily on one part of the RA training called “Diversity Facilitation Training.” RAs were trained using definitions like these:

**A RACIST:** A racist is one who is both privileged and socialized on the basis of race by a white supremacist (racist) system. The term applies to all white people (i.e., people of European descent) living in the United States, regardless of class, gender, religion, culture or sexuality. By this definition, people of color cannot be racists, because as peoples within the U.S. system, they do not have the power to back up their prejudices, hostilities or acts of discrimination...

**REVERSE RACISM:** A term created and used by white people to deny their white privilege. Those in denial use the term reverse racism to refer to hostile behavior by people of color toward whites, and to affirmative action policies, which allegedly give ‘preferential treatment’ to people of color over whites. In the U.S., there is no such thing as “reverse racism.”<sup>3</sup>

The training was heavy-handed as it passed from RAs to students. Guerrier described it as leaving “a mental footprint on [students’] consciousness.” The staff actually called the program a treatment: “through the...curriculum experience (a treatment) specific attitudinal or behavioral changes (learning) will occur.” The fact that ResLife viewed students as patients in need of “treatment” for their problems revealed their utter lack of respect for the students and their freedom of conscience.

A freshman at Delaware couldn’t escape the ideological, highly politicized messages about consumerism, social justice, affirmative action, world redistribution of wealth, and so on. The messages were woven into the fabric of the very place where students slept or talked late into the night. The door decorations were not the usual “Hello, My Name Is,” but featured the “three interlocking circles” of “sustainability”: “social justice,” “healthy environments,” and “strong economies.”

The messages were reinforced by “roommate contracts,” “suite constitutions,” and the one-on-one sessions for which RAs, students themselves, had been trained with “delivery strategies.” And they were reinforced at the mandatory floor meetings, where RAs led activities that forced students to

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<sup>3</sup>Such definitions are not new or unique to Delaware; see Kors and Silverglate, *Shadow University*, chap. 10.

reveal their personal views and to suffer public shame for taking conservative rather than progressive positions on social issues. In one such activity, students were to stand on one side of the room if they agreed with, for example, gay marriage, the other side if not. Staying in the middle was not tolerated because, the students were told, the real world is polarized like this.

The pressure to conform to particular standards included mandatory “social justice” activities. For instance, at the Dickinson complex,<sup>4</sup> “Each student would be asked to make a commitment to reduce their [ecological] footprint by at least 20% before the next one-on-one meeting.” In the Christiana Towers, all juniors were to “act on the internal belief that societal problems are everyone’s responsibility.” Each student was expected to experience a “cultural plunge,” namely, “an experience that forces the student to leave his/her comfort zone and surround him/herself with people of which [*sic*] s/he has never interacted on a personal level before.” And at various points throughout the year, Russell Complex students were required to advocate for a “sustainable world” and for an “oppressed” social group.

Freshmen had no way to opt out. One RA announced that the group sessions gave her “a chance to know how everyone’s doing and where everyone stands on certain issues or topics. Not to scare anyone or anything, but these are MANDATORY!!”

### The New “Sustainability” Agenda

ResLife’s ideological messages are part of a worldwide “sustainability education” movement. The United Nations declared 2005–2014 the “Decade of Education for Sustainable Development.” UNESCO is the lead agency for the program. Its goal is “to integrate the principles, values, and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning.” But the agenda goes far beyond environmentalism, just as at Delaware. The worldwide project is to “encourage changes in behavior that will create a more sustainable future in terms of environmental integrity, economic viability, and a just society for present and future generations.” University of Delaware ResLife and many other “sustainability” educators in the United

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<sup>4</sup>Ironically, several of Delaware’s dorms were named to honor the First State’s role in the founding of America as a free republic. See <http://www.lib.udel.edu/ud/spec/exhibits/sampler/delaware.htm>.

States have taken that program to mean education into a very specific progressive agenda.<sup>5</sup>

For instance, the American College Personnel Association's (ACPA) Sustainability Taskforce, on which ResLife director Kathleen Kerr serves as a member, identified several "educational outcomes" around the sustainability agenda. At Delaware, ResLife planned an entire four-year sustainability curriculum, making only a few alterations to the ACPA learning outcomes. Here are some of Delaware's expected "competencies" for all students:

Each student will recognize that systemic oppression exists in our society. (sophomore year)

Each student will recognize the benefits of dismantling systems of oppression. (sophomore year)

Each student will be able to utilize their knowledge of sustainability to change their daily habits and consumer mentality. (junior year)

Learn the skills necessary to be a change agent. (junior year)

Demonstrate civic engagement toward the development of a sustainable society. (senior year)

Maybe you like these goals; maybe you don't. At a public university, shouldn't that be each student's choice? Such declarations are possible *endpoints* of democratic debate and a college education, but they are hardly suitable as university dogma, a *basis* for a curriculum that serves all kinds of students in a pluralistic democracy.

ResLife had carefully repackaged the UN program to proclaim that it was merely helping young Americans learn good "citizenship." After all, citizenship education was an explicit part of the university's mission. And ResLife set itself as the arbiter of the proper responsibilities of citizenship. For Kerr, these responsibilities entailed progressive advocacy on these issues:

- Environmental Racism
- Fair Trade
- Living Wage

<sup>5</sup>See, e.g., Debra Rowe, "Environmental Literacy and Sustainability as Core Requirements: Success Stories and Models," in W.L. Filho, ed., *Teaching Sustainability at Universities: Towards Curriculum Greening* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

- Domestic Partnerships
- Corporate Responsibility
- Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Gender Equity
- Water Rights
- Human Rights
- Child Labor Issues
- Affirmative Action
- Multicultural Competence
- Pollution & Farming Practices
- Worker's Rights
- Sweatshop Labor
- Slavery

All of that was on a PowerPoint slide that President Harker never saw, at a conference that Harker did not attend.<sup>6</sup> Yet Kerr considered this the ideal subject matter for students in the dormitories, never mind that such topics are already covered in regular, optional university courses. The prerogative is normally the faculty's to investigate and debate these issues with students. But ResLife was setting the educational agenda—as well as the opinions that students were expected to internalize. The same people who probably would have objected strenuously (and rightfully) to an “American patriotism” curriculum saw nothing wrong with imposing their own very specific agenda on students.

### **The Brainwashing Curriculum in Action**

The first student outcry concerned the coercive, mandatory group sessions in the dorms. FIRE first learned about the program from a student's father, whose son had alerted him (and later left Delaware altogether). The concerned parent described the activities his son reported as

ugly, hateful, and extremely divisive. It forced the students to act out the worst possible racial stereotypes and was replete with...ideological commentary and gratuitous slurs...

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<sup>6</sup>Keith E. Edwards and Kathleen G. Kerr, “Sustainable Development: Towards Healthy Environments, Economic Strength, and Social Justice,” presentation, “Tools for Social Justice Conference,” sponsored by the American College Personnel Association and its Commission for Social Justice Educators, Kansas City, Missouri, November 13, 2006.

Shortly after hearing from him, FIRE received word from two Delaware professors, Jan Blits and Linda Gottfredson, that their students had bitterly complained about the program. From that point forward, they put in countless hours to protect the rights of Delaware students. Not a single other faculty member has been brave enough to come forward with public criticism.<sup>7</sup>

The group sessions were designed to help students learn which of their opinions were “congruent” with ResLife’s idea of good citizenship. In the name of tolerance, students were being taught how different they were from one another—in ways that polarized the students and required them to reveal their most personal beliefs to people they had only recently met. Consider whether the following set of mandatory activities, given here with their original titles, reads more like brainwashing or like a critical, academic analysis of racism, sexism, or other dynamics in American society.

### *Surrounded by Stereotypes*

Students find thirteen pieces of paper posted around the room. Each piece of paper has a “social identity” written on it: Latino/Latina/Hispanic, Obese, Poor, Jewish, Male, Asian, Lesbian/Gay, and so on. All students must record on every sheet the stereotypes they have heard associated with these identities (or a zero if they can’t think of any), and then the RA leads a discussion of the answers. RAs are told to follow these guidelines:

Students are asked to focus on stereotypes in the media to encourage them to share “real” stereotypes that actually exist without the fear that they will be judged by their peers....This activity needs to be done rapidly. Pressure is to be put on the participants as the goal is to have them write down the first thing that comes to their mind.

How can a subconscious word-association exercise simultaneously rely on memories of stereotypes found in the media? Clearly, the exercise is intended to be characterized by pressure rather than mature reflection.

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<sup>7</sup>Although a few faculty members have spoken out at faculty meetings, one of them thought it was appropriate to *apologize* to Vice President Michael Gilbert for voting against the 2008–2009 version of the curriculum, immediately following the May 12, 2008, meeting. At the meeting, which I attended, the meeting chair, senate president (and professor) Alan Fox, debated from the floor, nodded in approval of the speakers he agreed with, and interrupted or challenged many of the speakers with whom he disagreed, students and professors alike. Fox interrupted so loudly that in many cases the speaker simply stopped talking. He challenged one student to provide evidence and suggested that another was being uncivil. At one point, he cut off Gottfredson while she was speaking, on the ground that the issue had already been discussed, even though that issue had not previously been discussed. Other professors seemed to have been strong-armed before the meeting to ensure their public support for the 2008–2009 version of the program.



In a focus group at one dorm, the recommended follow-up questions included: “How do you define your comfortableness with homosexuality?” “Do you think that religion and sexual identity could ever coexist?” “Do you feel that your beliefs and actions (behaviors) contribute to the social injustice in American society?”

### ***Day In, Day Out Deluge***

Students break up into role-playing groups or “families,” each of which exemplifies one of the social identities by means of a narrative about the family. The narrative includes scenarios that express denigrating stereotypes about each identity. Then, the families are given the list of stereotypes from the first activity and are “reminded that from this moment on they have inherited all the stereotypes.” Thus, the students role-play by demonstrating the worst stereotypes they can imagine!

### ***Fishbowl Discussion***

The third exercise is an interrogation. A student from each “family” sits in the center of the room, surrounded by the others, and is asked to reveal his feelings. Each student is told to stay “in character,” yet the RA is told to “pay attention to body language and cues from the rest of the family to ensure that they are all fully engaged.” The point is to make everyone as uncomfortable as possible so that each student “learns” through adversity.

### ***Commitment to Diversity Statement***

These three exercises are designed to shame and pressure all students into signing a vow of commitment to diversity. The students identify which of thirty commitments they will make in college, based on their “level of activism.” Keep in mind: this is the beginning of the freshman year. Their choices include:

1. Create an anti-prejudice slogan for your floor, such as “I Don’t Put Up With Put-Downs.”
17. Investigate the cultural diversity of various performers [brought] to campus.
30. Examine your textbooks and course work to determine whether it is equitable, representative and multicultural.

Each student now receives a Commitment to Diversity card on which the student is to record three things learned, two questions, and one new commitment coming out of the earlier activities. Later, “their RA will be asking them questions related to their responses during their first one-on-one meeting.”

Finally, each student “can choose to sign” the Commitment to Diversity Statement. By this point in the day, it would take an awful lot of chutzpah for a freshman to refuse to sign the statement in the presence of the RA and his or her peers—even if one’s objection were simply that RAs should not be treating adult students like morally deficient children in need of reform.

Again, this was just the beginning. Four years’ worth of activities awaited.

### The Science of Social Change

A core part of ResLife’s social change interests involved finding the most effective method for behavioral and thought reform in the residence halls. The staff assessed and tracked the efficacy of their various “treatments” through pre- and post-treatment surveys such as the questionnaires, the one-on-one interviews, and behavioral observation—for example, the number of students who were attending the advertised “diversity events.” (Apparently you could get a better room the following year if you documented your attendance at enough diversity events.)

But the students did not know—and their parents did not know—that they were research subjects in a grand thought-reform experiment ( $n > 7,000$ ). Here are some questions from the Fall 2006 surveys:

2. Would you be comfortable being close friends with any of the following persons? Mark YES or NO

African American/Black.....	Y N
A heterosexual man.....	Y N
An international student.....	Y N
An openly gay or bisexual woman.....	Y N

3. Would you be comfortable dating any of the following persons?  
(Assume that you are single)

- Middle Eastern..... Y N
- A heterosexual woman..... Y N
- A person with different religious beliefs than yours..... Y N
- An openly gay or bisexual man..... Y N

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Since the beginning of the school year:	A Absolutely	B Usually	C Rarely	D Not at all
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- 3. Activities during my floor meetings helped me to gain an understanding that minority groups in our society are oppressed.
- 4. Activities during my floor meetings helped me to gain an understanding of stereotypes I have about other people.
- 10. I feel sadness and/or anger when people fail to acknowledge the privilege they have in a society.

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Based on your time in Russell thus far, please rate your attitude about people from those Social groups compared to your attitude when you arrived in August.	A Very open	B Open	C No change	D Less open
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- 13. Sexual Orientation
- 14. Race
- 15. Gender
- 16. Religion
- 17. Ability

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Since the beginning of the school year:	A Yes	B No
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- 18. I have made an effort to educate myself about social groups different from my own.
- 19. I am more likely to confront others when they use derogatory terms.
- 20. I am more concerned about acts of injustice in my community or elsewhere.

About 86 percent of the 671 students surveyed in one dorm said they would be comfortable being close friends with an openly gay or bisexual woman. Did they feel pressure to give the “right,” clearly expected answer? If not, then 86 percent did not need ResLife’s intervention. Of course, the “wrong” answer should not have to lead to thought reform, but that’s just what such assessments were measuring.

The RAs assessed themselves, too. When they reported their “best” and “worst” experiences with students, the self-evaluations were supposed to be about the RAs’ own ability to change hearts and minds. But the self-assessments were often about whether the students had values in “congruence” with the curriculum’s “citizenship values.” It is no coincidence that the “best” one-on-ones were those where the students showed “tolerance”—including the student who reported on the intolerance of her father—and that the “worst” were those where the students resisted the indoctrination, like the student whose story opens this article. Some of the personal information on individual students went all the way up to Kathleen Kerr and ended up in the official report on the 2006–2007 curriculum.

The negative psychological effects of this research, for many students, were quite damaging. It would not be hard to argue that the university was breaking the law on informed consent for human subject research.<sup>8</sup> One student wrote to FIRE:

We are told to “embrace diversity.” The way this has played out on my floor is performing multiple childish activities, “teaching” us how to handle situations involving racial, sexual, socioeconomic, and cultural diversity. In each of these meetings, the underlying theme seems to be to make us feel guilty about the privileges we have, and to convince us [of] our part in white supremacy. Most questions we are asked must be answered one hundred percent in one direction or the other; there is no room for indecision, or holding a neutral view on any issue. This adds to the feeling of guilt imposed on us....I’m being told it’s wrong to be a

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<sup>8</sup>In 1974, after public revelations about the government’s infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the government’s Belmont Report sought to ensure that government agencies conducting research would treat individuals as “autonomous agents.” “To show lack of respect for an autonomous agent,” the report explains, “is to repudiate that person’s considered judgments” or “to deny an individual the freedom to act on those considered judgments”; see <http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.htm>. The law requires school officials to obtain the approval of its institutional review board and the informed consent of all human subjects prior to commencing any human subject research. ResLife was at least superficially aware of the legal issues involved. In the “Research Agenda” written by Associate Director of Residence Life James Tweedy, ResLife noted that those who wished to transform the “assessment results” gathered from the residential “treatment” program into “publication-quality” reports would “need to discuss such plans in advance with the Director or Associate Director to make sure all human subject protocols have been followed.”

middle-class white male. The whole system being used seems to be trying to change the students into all holding the same views—the views the school, Residence Life specifically, wants us to hold. This is in no way diversity, and it is in no way right to attempt to brainwash the students...

Another wrote:

The questions asked at the one-on-one were way too awkward and personal. I honestly thought that the meeting was going to be about stuff that mattered. You know, what my major was...what I wanted to accomplish here, etc. Instead, I got a slew of questions that I've never even talked about with some of my good friends back home!

There are dozens of additional examples beyond these.<sup>9</sup> RAs who resisted the curriculum also suffered:

I was an RA before they started this new curriculum at the University of Delaware. When they instituted this curriculum, they had a "you better love it, or get out!" attitude. I didn't like it, but I enjoyed making a difference in the lives of the students, so I stayed on. I saw many problems with the curriculum, and pointed them out to my direct supervisor [who] proceeded to tell me that my arguments were wrong, and that I was just stirring up trouble. I went to his supervisor...and got a similar response. Many of the former RAs who had returned were fed up with this curriculum, and any time we spoke up about it, our concerns were shot down, and we were branded as trouble makers...supervisors were selected not based on their abilities to manage dorms...but instead, those RAs who were most passionate about the curriculum got to lead...

What concerned me the most was the focus on changing the way students think. We weren't encouraged to hold open dialog with the students until last semester because many higher ups believed that freshmen couldn't handle mature discussions. I think that they were also afraid of letting the students control the discussion. In meetings with our supervisors, we were often asked which students were most resistant to our curriculum. I felt like the secret police, \*not\* a mentor.

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<sup>9</sup>Visit "Never Mind, Tocqueville, Let's List Slurs" and "Postcards from Social Justice Bootcamp: Delaware's ResLife Program," posted on [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org), to read similar student and RA accounts of Delaware's ResLife program.

The students on some floors managed to mount successful revolts, as this RA acknowledges in an e-mail to students:

I just wanted to remind you all that floor meetings ARE mandatory. While I am a very understanding person, there is NO WAY that HALF of you weren't able to make it last night. Also, NONE of you e-mailed me about prior commitments....The content is IMPORTANT! Here at the University of Delaware, living in the residence halls is a Living-Learning Experience, meaning that you'll learn just as much, if not MORE, in the residence halls. Like it or not, you all are the future Leaders, and the world is Diverse, so learning to Embrace and Appreciate that diversity is ESSENTIAL.

ResLife actually encouraged such badgering.

### **Taking the Curriculum on the Road**

When a parent asked ResLife for the materials his son had been exposed to, he was denied access. The curriculum was for advocates and Delaware officials only. Meanwhile, to true believers, the University of Delaware was brazenly advertising its educational wares to selected audiences across the country.

ResLife was so proud of its achievements that Delaware began to hold annual Residential Curriculum Institutes for trusted counterparts from around the United States and Canada. Over seventy people from more than thirty-five schools registered for the first one in January 2007, which focused on the university's cutting-edge "curricular approach." The institute was cosponsored by ACPA, which sent its president, Jeanne S. Steffes, to be the opening speaker. Then-University of Delaware president David Roselle was on hand to welcome the participants, and the keynote address by Marcia Baxter Magolda of Miami University of Ohio was sponsored by Delaware's office of the provost and its academic and student affairs council.

ResLife staff, some of them sporting EdD degrees from the university's own school of education, also began publishing articles about the cutting-edge methods of the curriculum—without quite revealing the sustainability agenda. For instance, in the November–December 2006 *About Campus*, a magazine for college and university educators, Kerr and Associate Director of Residence Life James Tweedy published "Beyond Seat Time and Student Satisfaction: A Curricular Approach to Residential Education." In that article,

Kerr and Tweedy discuss their desired “learning goals,” which include requiring each student to, among other things, “explore societal privilege and the experiences of those disadvantaged in our democracy,” “explore social identity privilege,” and “explore class privilege.” They also—creepy as it sounds—discuss potential improvements to the program, such as “the possibility of identifying behavioral factors that can be observed and recorded by hall staff members.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Humility, Freedom of Conscience, and the First Amendment**

For ResLife, sustainability was not a choice but a necessity, with the fate of the world in the balance. The worldwide social, economic, and environmental emergency justified practically everything. Freedom of conscience was an expensive luxury.

In the United States, we know totalitarians when we see them. The First Amendment to our Constitution protects the right to keep our innermost thoughts free from governmental intrusion. It also protects the right to be free from compelled speech. During the Second World War, when Jehovah's Witnesses challenged West Virginia's law of mandatory observance of the American flag, the Supreme Court declared in *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943) that individual conscience must be respected. At this critical time in American history, the Supreme Court acknowledged:

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.<sup>11</sup>

The Court concluded that “the purpose of the First Amendment to our Constitution” was precisely to protect “from all official control” the domain of individual thought, “the sphere of intellect and spirit.”

The Court's commitment to liberty in education far outshines the misplaced high-mindedness of the University of Delaware's program. As Justice Robert H. Jackson wrote for the Court in *Barnette*:

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<sup>10</sup>Kathleen G. Kerr and James Tweedy, “Beyond Seat Time and Student Satisfaction: A Curricular Approach to Residential Education,” *About Campus* (November–December 2006): 12, 15.

<sup>11</sup>*West Virginia State Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624, 642 (1943).

Struggles to coerce uniformity of sentiment in support of some end thought essential to their time and country have been waged by many good as well as by evil men....As governmental pressure toward unity becomes greater, so strife becomes more bitter as to whose unity it shall be. Probably no deeper division of our people could proceed from any provocation than from finding it necessary to choose what doctrine and whose program public educational officials shall compel youth to unite in embracing. Ultimate futility of such attempts to compel coherence is the lesson of every such effort from the Roman drive to stamp out Christianity as a disturber of its pagan unity, the Inquisition, as a means to religious and dynastic unity, the Siberian exiles as a means to Russian unity, down to the fast failing efforts of our present totalitarian enemies.<sup>12</sup>

The more that FIRE learned about the details of the curriculum, the more aghast we became about the great lengths to which the University of Delaware had gone to ensure the “educational outcome” of its “shadow university.” This was no program thought up in a moment; the description of the ResLife curriculum included scores of bibliographic references. *Barnette* was nowhere to be found.

FIRE writes to dozens of schools each year in defense of students’ individual rights—defending a liberal environmentalist, for instance, who was expelled for protesting new parking garages at Valdosta State University, and a conservative student publication at Tufts that was found guilty of harassment for publishing clearly protected political satire about affirmative action as well as facts about Islam—but FIRE has never encountered a more systematic assault upon the individual liberty, dignity, privacy, and autonomy of university students than the University of Delaware “treatment” program.

Was Delaware really unaware that a state-sponsored institution of higher education in the United States has no legal or moral right to engage in a program of systematic thought reform? Did the promoters of the “citizenship” and “sustainability” curriculum have such little respect for the First Amendment’s protection of the human and American right to freedom of conscience? Or did they simply value “sustainability” and diversity with so much urgency that no violation of individual rights was too much?

Delaware’s residence life education program, which presumed to show students the specific ideological assumptions they needed in order to be

<sup>12</sup>*Id.*, 640–41.



better people, crossed the line—not just a little, but extensively and in many ways—from education into unconscionably arrogant, invasive, and immoral thought reform. The moral and legal problems posed by the residence life education program were abundant and cut to the core of the most essential rights of a free people. What made the program so offensive was moral: its brazen disregard for autonomy, dignity, and individual conscience, and the sheer contempt it displayed for the university's students as well as the so-called dominant culture that made them so allegedly deficient.

As aggressive as civil liberties organizations like FIRE may seem, our guiding principles are the opposite of dogma, for humility lies behind our support for freedom of conscience. We recognize that human limitations, our perpetual deficiencies in wisdom and knowledge, give us every reason *not* to yield power to those who claim to be worthy to dictate others' deepest personal beliefs. We insist that the government's power to reward and punish should not usurp the power of free individuals to work out their own beliefs in our very complex world. When we state in no uncertain terms what a government or a public university *may not* do, it is because we value what human autonomy, with all its faults, *can* do.

### Eliminating Dissenters

ResLife did not take kindly to having the program immediately and completely shut down. The *Barnette* Court observed:

Those who begin coercive elimination of dissent soon find themselves exterminating dissenters. Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard.<sup>13</sup>

Faculty and RAs who stood up against the program felt the heat. For instance, a parent wrote to FIRE about a conversation with her son:

He told me that RA's were "mandated" to speak out against FIRE to the media. One refused and was told by Residence Life staff that he would lose his job and the University would not consider him a student anymore. I asked him if he [the RA] would be expelled and he said that was 100% correct.

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<sup>13</sup>*Id.*, 641.

It is unclear whether the parent heard an exaggerated tale of promised retribution, but it corroborates the RA account given above and the following account posted on the *Chronicle of Higher Education* news blog:

I have been an RA for the past two years and have not been comfortable with this program. It has gotten out of hand and demanding of students. Yesterday [October 31, 2007], I was approached to be an advocate of the program. Several of my RA friends have been asked to be available for talking with the press. When I declined I was taken aside and told that my future as an RA was in jeopardy as was [my] future [as] a student.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, FIRE and other critics were attacked as agents of hate rather than as supporters of basic rights. It did not matter that FIRE took no position on the merits of the sustainability agenda—we objected merely to the coercive methods of the movement’s proponents. At the second annual ResLife curriculum conference in January 2008, one participant characterized FIRE as a “bad organization with ties to white supremacy groups.” According to an inside report, the conference opened

with a presentation by a senior residence life official from a large private university in the northeast. She lit one large candle “to represent the knowledge and responsibility that we have as student affairs and residence life professionals.” The large candle was next to a plate of many smaller candles, which she explained were the students, to whom “we pass on that light.”...Suddenly, she blew out the large candle. She dramatically looked at the audience and said that in fall 2007, “Our light went out,” and it was “hate, fear, ignorance, and stupidity” that caused it to go out. She did not name the source of these candle-snuffing iniquities, perhaps because the name FIRE would have damaged her metaphor. She then...declared, “With this conference, we relight the candle...and hate, fear, ignorance, and stupidity will not snuff it out [again].” She relit the candle, and continued in this vein, concluding, “Journey with me towards our revolution of the future.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Bill, discussion thread posting on November 1, 2007, on “Free-Speech Group Accuses U. of Delaware of ‘Thought Reform,’” at *News Blog, Chronicle of Higher Education*, October, 31, 2007, <http://chronicle.com/news/article/3339/free-speech-group-accuses-u-of-delaware-of-thought-reform>.

<sup>15</sup>Peter Wood, “Inside the ACPA,” posting on February 29, 2008, at “How Many Delawares?” on [www.nas.org](http://www.nas.org), website of the National Association of Scholars, [http://www.nas.org/polInitiatives.cfm?doc\\_id=25&Keyword\\_Desc=How%20Many%20Delawares?](http://www.nas.org/polInitiatives.cfm?doc_id=25&Keyword_Desc=How%20Many%20Delawares?)

Indeed, ResLife remains entirely unrepentant. Three times ResLife proposed essentially the same program for 2008–2009, and three times a faculty committee rejected it. No one has apologized to the students for the pressure and shame, the invasion of privacy, or the other assaults on students' freedom of conscience.

### **The 2008–2009 Program**

Finally, under time pressure, Delaware's Student Life Committee passed along a proposal for this year that was still seeped in the sustainability dogma. It still tried to achieve specific "learning outcomes" by changing students' thoughts, values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The one-on-one sessions with RAs were merely renamed "RA conversations."

At the last possible moment, ResLife accepted a cosmetic amendment to the proposal—simply inserting the word "environmental" before each instance of "sustainability"—without actually changing any of the activities in the program. With promises that the program was actually "traditional" (false), "optional" (highly suspect), and under new, strict oversight (despite the fact that all the leading ResLife administrators kept their jobs), the faculty senate and then the trustees let the proposal pass. The person hired to oversee the new program, Dawn Thompson—an old colleague of Vice President for Student Life Michael Gilbert—did not come to campus until November. Delaware's freshmen are now going through the new program.<sup>16</sup>

The University of Delaware case is a quintessential example of good intentions gone horribly, horribly wrong. The school has given "sustainability" such a bad name among conservative critics—even those who have been warming to environmentalism—that it will take years to undo the damage. What really unifies most Americans is not the sustainability dogma but an appreciation for the freedoms that make us human. Being American means that we respect one another enough to tolerate all sorts of people in our democracy. When we encounter people with whom we disagree, the alternative to violence is not indoctrination but persuasion. For the most part, professors understand this concept. But if the sustainability evangelists had their way, our most esteemed institutions of liberal education would become unworthy of the name.

<sup>16</sup>A February 13, 2009, report on a student survey shows that the "environmental sustainability" side of the program is actually occurring, with more than half of respondents agreeing that "they learned more about environmental sustainability efforts" from the ResLife staff. See <http://www.udel.edu/udaily/2009/feb/facultysenate021309.html>, which also reports that nine out of ten students understand that the new program is not mandatory.