

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)

ResLife must reconsider its purpose

UD still doesn't get the real meaning of sustainability

By: Adam Kissel

Posted: 3/18/08

If all you know about sustainability initiatives on campus is what you read from Dining Services, you might think it is all about the environment. You might think it just means recycling and not taking more napkins than you need. You might even know that it refers to buying organic food from local farmers.

But at the university, that's not what sustainability really means.

In fact, documents written or promoted by Residence Life officials demonstrate that sustainability is a highly politicized, comprehensive agenda including positions on topics such as affirmative action, gay marriage, abortion, corporations and worldwide redistribution of wealth.

Residence Life wants everyone to embrace those highly politicized opinions.

For Residence Life and other sustainability advocates across the country, environmentalism is only one of the three central elements of the agenda. The other two elements are often called "social justice" and "strong economies." These general terms seem easy to agree with, but reasonable people can, and do, disagree.

For evangelists like Residence Life, promoting "strong economies" does not mean, for example, free trade. It means favoring the "distribution of world income" over domestic economic growth - and concluding therefore, that a responsible world citizen must recognize the "economic inequalities" that lead to "social injustices."

And just what does social justice mean? Likewise, this term is defined as "a globally acceptable distribution" of wealth and power and as "morally correct action." Who determines which economic policies are moral, acceptable or socially just?

The bizarre answer is that Residence Life officials think there are qualified to make these judgments.

Maybe you agree with Residence Life's goals, maybe you do not. I like some of them, but not others. However, at a public university, shouldn't students make their own choices?

Declarations of certain values and beliefs might be possible endpoints of democratic debate, but they are hardly suitable as a basis for a politically neutral curriculum that serves all university students.

Residence Life has been saying it is just promoting good citizenship in line with the university's overall educational principles. The trick here, however, is that the Residence Life directors took it upon themselves to define what counts as good citizenship in a diverse society.

What kind of a human being and citizen do you want to be?

If you are still thinking that through, like most college students are, Residence Life would be happy to tell you what kind you should be.

To make things worse, there is no way that the current Residence Life staff could run a residential program without advocating a sustainability agenda. This is because Residence Life's goals are defined by its politicized educational priority statement.

When Residence Life says students have a "responsibility to contribute to a sustainable society at a local, national and global level," you can be sure that it has specific ideas about what your responsibilities are, what you should believe and what you should do. For Residence Life to have any hope of restoring a program that truly serves all undergraduates, this statement needs to go.

ResLife should start over from scratch. It might even need an entirely new staff.

Again, a sustainability agenda is not necessarily good or bad in itself. The problem is that Residence Life has determined unilaterally that every student ought to accept and promote the agenda.

As the Supreme Court declared in the landmark case of *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* in the midst of World War II, "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."

The court concluded that the very purpose of the First Amendment was to protect the domain of individual thought from officials who want to control it.

Compare this ringing endorsement of freedom with Residence Life's educational priority statement, which aims to change students' "thoughts, values, beliefs, and actions." Following its "sustainability" agenda, all the evidence shows that Residence Life does not merely want students to understand or develop their existing values and beliefs. Rather, Residence Life wants students to internalize a very specific view of "citizenship values," and change to become the kinds of people Residence Life insists are necessary for the world's future.

Residence Life should stop trying to take over undergraduate education from the faculty, the real educators on campus. Indoctrination has no part to play in a liberal education.

Adam Kissel is the director for the Individual Rights Program for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. His viewpoints do not necessarily represent those of the Review staff. Please send comments to adam@thefire.org.

© Copyright 2008 The Review