

Some students at law school say problems not widespread

Diversity training begins at UI college

By JOEL MILLS of the Tribune

MOSCOW - Two years ago, a bit of trouble started brewing at the University of Idaho College of Law.

The eyes in pictures of gay and civil rights student activists were gouged out, or pierced by pins. A short time later, someone posted fliers saying that Mormons, Catholics and other Christians are at the root of anti-gay sentiment.

And more recently, a student made disparaging comments about women, saying they had no place in law school and should be at home bearing children.

The tense climate created by these incidents led an accreditation team to strongly recommend diversity and professionalism training for everyone in the law school. Last month, law school faculty members decided to make the sessions mandatory for themselves and all students.

But two students said that while such incidents are disturbing, they are in no way indicative of the general culture at the law school.

"I don't think it's widespread," said first-year law student Stacey Haase of Pocatello. "I think there are isolated incidents that have occurred over a cumulative time that in aggregate show that there is at least the undercurrent of a larger problem."

Lauren McConnell, a third-year student from Laramie, Wyo., said it is only natural for law students to have heated discussions, and even arguments.

"I think there are certainly people who have said things that are uncivil," McConnell said. "But I think it would be an overstatement to say there is some sort of political feud in the law school. This is not 'West Side Story.' "

Still, the joint American Bar Association-Association of American Law Schools accreditation team "emphatically" called for the diversity and professionalism training after its visit last October, according to Dean Don Burnett.

A final report from the accrediting agencies isn't due until late spring or early summer. Patrick Hetrick, the North Carolina law professor who led the accreditation visit, declined to comment on the diversity and professionalism problems his team found, saying the information is confidential at this point.

But Burnett did acknowledge that tension between certain factions does exist. He expressed hope that the sessions - which he called open dialogues where all opinions were invited - would produce more harmony between those with different beliefs.

"Part of a legal education includes the professionalism component of learning to disagree without being disagreeable," Burnett said. "I would hope that an earnest and collegial exchange in these dialogues will produce more mutual understanding among the students, and find what they have in common as they move forward and try to be successful in their careers."

Students attended the sessions Tuesday.

The decision to make attendance at the dialogues mandatory - and the placement of a memo in each student's file noting whether they attended or not - stirred controversy last week when a group of students wrote to leadership in the state Legislature to complain. In return, a group of 20 lawmakers wrote to the dean expressing their displeasure with the requirement.

Burnett responded with a detailed justification for the sessions, and he has apologized to students who felt threatened by the placement of a memo in their file.

McConnell, 25, said that while the accreditation team found some problems around diversity and professionalism, the law school is generally a welcoming place. She said the attention of the ABA, the media and the Legislature has blown a few isolated, ugly incidents out of proportion.

"We're friends," she said of her classmates. "We've been through hell. This is law school. And even if we don't like each other, there is a level of respect."

Haase, 40, echoed that sentiment, saying that negative attention has distorted the reality of an overwhelmingly positive environment. She also expressed her support for free speech, but said some incidents have gone too far.

"Being in academia, you want to encourage the free flow of ideas and the exchange of thoughts and opinions and open discussion," she said. "But where is that fine line between sharing your ideas and your thoughts, and crossing over the line and creating an environment where people don't feel safe or welcome or accepted? I think it has been crossed in some situations."

Student Bar Association president Ryan Sargent did not respond to calls and an email seeking comment on the diversity dialogues.

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