

OUR VIEW

BALL STATE MUST TAKE STRONG STANCE ON RFRA TO ENSURE IT IS INCLUSIVE

AT ISSUE:

University's
handling of
RFRA and
diversity

Editor's Note: In this issue of The Daily News, we have exclusively included content related to diversity and tolerance at Ball State and in Indiana. Following Tuesday's campus-wide discussion, these issues must continue to be the focus of the university community.

While Indiana debates the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, Ball State has been dealing with its own issues of diversity and tolerance.

After a student who formerly owned a Confederate flag won the John R. Emens Outstanding Senior Award, some students felt they were not being fairly represented on campus.

They called for a university-wide diversity workshop; this alone demonstrates the depth of the concern about diversity on campus.

Daily News articles focusing on the campus diversity issue and RFRA have received a high amount of traffic on ballstatedaily.com and on social media; It is clear that the community cares about diversity, so Ball State cannot allow its voice to fade into the background.

President Paul W. Ferguson sent campus-wide emails regarding diversity in response to both these issues, but failed to make a real statement or get to the heart of RFRA. The university needs to go further and make a direct stance on the law.

In the last week's email, Ferguson said Ball State "will not tolerate discrimination" but never specifically mentioned the state law. His reaffirmation of the university's commitment to diversity is valuable

and necessary, but the university cannot avoid taking a direct stance on the law itself.

RFRA gives a person, company or organization the ability to make decisions based on their religion without legal action from a government entity. Paired with the lack of an anti-discrimination law at the state level, RFRA opens up the potential for business owners to refuse service to LG-BTQ individuals.

Other presidents of universities in Indiana have released stronger statements on the law.

Butler University President James Danko said RFRA "strikes me as ill-conceived legislation at best" in his statement.

"I strongly encourage our state leaders to take immediate action to address the damage done by this legislation and to reaffirm the fact that Indiana is a place that welcomes, supports, respects, and values all people," he said.

Danko moved beyond a simple affirmation of his institution's principles: he declared a specific stance. Other universities, such as IU and DePauw, all issued statements clearly opposing RFRA.

Ferguson should have followed their lead in issuing a clear opposition toward RFRA.

The law's impact is now being felt on the university's doorstep.

The National Forensic Association will no longer have its 2016 national competition at Ball State because of RFRA. The Mid-American Conference is against RFRA, and will no

longer schedule events or meetings in Indiana. Because Ball State is the only Indiana school in the MAC, it is alone in feeling the backlash behind this law.

These two losses will have an impact on Ball State's financial situation and public image. But the main issue is how RFRA is hurting the community.

Without full recognition of these issues, Ball State is dismissing the value of some students. If a student cannot walk on campus or throughout the surrounding community without feeling targeted for their race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity because of this law, then Ball State is not doing enough. RFRA is on Ball State's doorstep, and the university needs to take the steps to make sure it does not stay.

If the Indiana government moves forward with anti-discrimination laws, then the state is moving in the right direction. But if Ball State never declares its opposition to RFRA, then why would NFA reconsider hosting the national competition here? The university needs to show them — and everyone — that it won't let RFRA stand.

Ball State has let these issues of diversity fester. The university can't make the same mistake again. It must take a clear stance if it is to accurately represent itself.

Ball State "will not tolerate discrimination," but that is not enough. The university must take a firmer stance on this issue that will affect Ball State students, the university's pocketbook and the state's lasting image.