

One Wisconsin Now: State Assembly considers attacking First Amendment rights of Wisconsinites to create campus safe spaces for right-wing hate speech

Posted on Wednesday, Jun 21, 2017

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Madison, Wisconsin — A bill restricting free speech on University of Wisconsin campuses, Assembly Bill 299 (AB 299), is being debated by the legislature today, despite Attorney General Brad Schimel wanting no part of enforcing the proposed law and a bill author publicly agreeing there were constitutional concerns with the legislation. One Wisconsin Now Executive Director Scot Ross blasted the right-wing ideologues behind the proposal for seeking to suppress the First Amendment rights of students, faculty and administrators in order to create campus safe spaces for right-wing provocateurs to engage in racist, misogynistic and xenophobic speech.

“Do the Assembly Republicans really have nothing better to do than bully students?” asked Ross. “Make no mistake about what this bill does, it suppresses First Amendment rights of students, faculty and administrators to create campus safe spaces for right-wing provocateurs to engage in racist, misogynistic and xenophobic speech.”

Despite existing laws on the books allowing disorderly conduct to be prosecuted and no incidents of right-wing speakers being prevented from delivering remarks on UW campuses, AB 299 threatens students with expulsion for exercising their First

Amendment right to denounce hate speech on University of Wisconsin campuses. In addition to the threats to students, the bill includes a provision requiring institutions to remain “neutral on public policy controversies” that could restrict faculty from doing research or commenting on public policy issues facing the state and the nation.

The proposal is based on recommendations produced by the Goldwater Institute, an Arizona-based think tank whose operations are underwritten by some of the largest right-wing funders including the Bradley, Koch and Walton foundations. According to an email from the office of Republican Assembly Speaker Rep. Robin Vos – found by One Wisconsin Now in a review of drafting records – he requested the bill be “drafted as is stated in the attachment,” in reference to a document containing model legislation from Goldwater.

One Wisconsin Now’s review also uncovered a Vos staff member requested language be added to sanction students for engaging in protests judged to be “indecent, profane or boisterous,” despite concerns raised by the drafting attorney that the language was problematic due to the terms being broad and ambiguous.

“There is already a chilling atmosphere on free expression for students of color like me on an overwhelmingly white campus,” said Savion Castro, One Wisconsin Now Research Assistant. “The bill’s authors have no clue what it is like to walk into a lecture hall of 200 people and be the only person of color. They would intimidate students of color from speaking out against injustice for fear of making white people uncomfortable.”

Assembly Republican Rep. Jesse Kremer who is listed as the lead author of the bill – despite it being requested by Speaker Vos – said in a recent radio interview, “I agree” with critics who call the bill unconstitutional. And according to drafting records, at a meeting with Rep. Vos’ staff the Attorney General’s office requested a provision directing them to enforce the bill be removed from the final version of AB 299.

Ross concluded, “Not only would this bill expel students for using their constitutional right to free speech, but also it could inhibit professors from conducting research and releasing research on critical public policy issues. It’s worse than big government, it’s Big Brother.”



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