

Rep. Taylor: UW Board of Regents should reject anti-free speech proposal

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Madison, Wisconsin –Today, Rep. Chris Taylor (D-Madison) and Sen. LaTonya Johnson (D-Milwaukee) held a press conference urging the UW Board of Regents to modify their “Commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech” policy, which infringes on constitutionally protected free speech. The legislators and UW Madison students highlighted their many concerns with the proposal, which will be voted on by the UW Board of Regents this Friday.

This proposal reflects the misguided and constitutionally infirm provisions in AB 299, previously passed by the state Assembly earlier this year but not yet acted on by the state Senate. It mandates that students must be suspended or expelled should they engage in “violent or other disorderly misconduct that materially and substantially disrupts the free expression of others.” It also mandates that “protests and demonstrations that interfere with the rights of others to engage in or listen to expressive activity shall not be permitted and shall be subject to sanction,” without defining this broad prohibition. During the Assembly debate on this measure, the bill’s sponsors could not confirm whether a student shouting out “No!” or “Yes!” during a speech would violate these prohibitions, and cause the student to be suspended or expelled.

Currently, individual UW campuses have the authority under UWS Chapters 17 and 18 to sanction students for engaging in disorderly or violent conduct, in addition to a range of other behaviors. The Regents’ proposed policy, however, mandates

severe sanctions should a student disrupt the free expression of others.

Sen. Johnson expressed, "It's disappointing that the UW System Board of Regents are willing to consider a policy that will give comfort to people coming to our campuses preaching hate and that we are threatening expulsions for students who stand up to hateful rhetoric and actions. Someone like my daughter, a black student on the UW - Milwaukee campus, should never have to feel threatened or fear for their safety because of the color of their skin."

Kat Kerwin, UW Madison student and Associated Students of Madison Representative, stated, "The Board of Regents Freedom of Speech Resolution is a one sided attack on student power. As a campus leader and activist I am concerned that the vaguely defined definition of punishable protest may put my education at risk at the expense of my activism. I call the Regents to vote with student interests."

The speakers encouraged the Board of Regents to abandon the pieces of the proposal that could chill speech and instead work to create a robust proposal that truly reflects the UW-System's long commitment to academic freedom and freedom of expression.

Rep. Taylor concluded, "The Board of Regents doesn't even mandate that serial rapists get expelled from UW, but if you are found to have disrupted a speech, you're out! These broad, vague prohibitions will leave students, faculty and staff in the position of not knowing what type of conduct is prohibited. Rather than encouraging rigorous debate and the free exchange of ideas, this proposal will curtail robust discussions and protected expressive activity."

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