

Tony Evers: One is the loneliest number

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They always say that one is the loneliest number. As State Superintendent for Wisconsin's public schools and one of only two non-Scott Walker appointments on the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents, I know it all too well.

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Last week, every single one of my fellow Regents attending our most recent meeting voted to approve a dangerous anti-free speech proposal that will, without question, chill speech at college campuses across Wisconsin. Under the proposal, which mirrors legislation drafted by conservative think tanks and is being advanced by conservatives in the Wisconsin Legislature, students would be expelled if found "disrupting the free speech of others." The term "disrupt" itself is overly broad and gives the university the means to expel a student for participating in any sort of protest.

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Expulsion is a serious matter – a punishment that UW System does not currently require for serious crimes like rape and sexual assault – and yet, Walker now wants to expel students for protesting. The proposal passed by the Regents does not even provide a definition for the word "disrupt."

One of the reasons I voted "No" is because this policy goes against the University's fundamental mission, "to serve and stimulate society by developing in students heightened intellectual, cultural, and humane sensitivities, scientific, professional and technological expertise, and a sense of purpose."

Proponents of this anti-free speech legislation argue liberal biases have overwhelmed our college campuses, but they cannot provide one single example of a conservative speaker being unable to complete their remarks at any college or university in Wisconsin. Not. One.

College campuses across Wisconsin, like the rest of the country, are confronting real, critical issues like racism and racial inequality, sexual assault, and gun safety. These debates are hard, but we must engage. They're complicated, and developing solutions requires an on-going, at times uncomfortable, dialogue between students, faculty, staff and the overall community.

The only political problem we have on our UW campuses is the politicians themselves. Some of my own colleagues on the Board of Regents even acknowledged this in their own remarks on this proposal, hoping that passage of this resolution would strengthen the Board of Regents relationship with the Republican-controlled Legislature.

Scott Walker and the Republican-controlled Legislature have had an ax to grind with UW System since assuming power in 2011. They have cut hundreds of millions in funding from higher education, while at the same time spent millions of tax dollars to create a conservative "research" institution on UW-Madison's campus. They eliminated tenure for faculty — making it easier to fire professors who step out of line. Now that they've succeeded in muzzling professors, they are going after the students.

As a proud alum of UW-Madison, I take this personally. I credit my UW education with giving me a sense of purpose – one that has guided me through a 40-year career in education. I am sick and tired of watching ideologues systematically dismantle an institution that has created tens of thousands of jobs and improved the lives of countless Wisconsinites.

As both an educator and a parent, I have always empowered kids to use their voice. In the classroom, we teach our kids to stand up for themselves. We want them to ask the tough questions and learn about who they are and what they believe in. This is rooted in respect and civility. Something Scott Walker, knows very little about.

Since the vote I've spoken with dozens of college kids from campuses across Wisconsin. Many feel like they've been sold out, used, or simply not heard. While I

may have just been the only one at that table who voted “No” – I am proud I was able to be that one.

— *Evers is state superintendent and a Democratic gubernatorial candidate.*