

# Assembly passes free expression bill, Dems deem it unnecessary

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The Assembly today passed a bill that would establish mandatory punishments for UW System students who “materially or substantially disrupt the free expression of others.”

But Dems quickly decried the bill as unnecessary, saying it would have a chilling effect on free speech guaranteed under the First Amendment.

Rep. Jimmy Anderson, D-Fitchburg, called the bill “an internet commenter’s interpretation of the First Amendment.”

The bill passed 62-37 with GOP Rep. Shae Sortwell, of Two Rivers, joining Dems in opposition. It now heads to the Senate.

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“We live in the United States of America where we should be allowed to have free expression,” Anderson said. “And that free expression sometimes comes with a little bit of anger and a little bit of distaste. The individuals who are being protested are being protested for a very good reason.”

AB 444 would suspend students for a minimum of one semester after a formal investigation and disciplinary hearing found them responsible for two offenses. Students would then be expelled after a third charge.

Rep. Joan Ballweg fired back at the Dem accusations. She said the bill is meant to help protect free expression by protecting speaker dialogue on campus from disruptors.

“Our organizations should be proud to bring in people with diverse opinions,” the

Markesan Republican said. “Just like here, we all get to take turns. We all get to have our opinions told in a respectful manner without being shouted down.”

The UW System Board of Regents is currently circulating a proposed administrative rule with similar language.

The bill’s author Rep. Cody Horlacher, R-Mukwonago, said the Board of Regents and some student governments are in favor of the bill because it only would address “violent and disorderly behavior that disrupts communication.”

“True, it’s not like our state is on fire with massive amounts of protests that are shouted down,” Horlacher said. “Here we have a policy that could be in place in statute before that even becomes an issue.”

But the proposed rule would need the gov’s approval. Gov. Tony Evers voted “no” on the proposal when he sat on the board as superintendent of public instruction. And a spokeswoman for the gov previously said his opinions on the matter haven’t changed since assuming office.

“The simple fact is you want to shield conservative speakers from having to deal with blowback from their unpopular views,” said Rep. Gary Hebl, D-Sun Prairie. “There is no need for this legislation and above all, this bill if passed would get vetoed. That’s a guarantee.”

See the bill:

<https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/2019/related/proposals/ab444>