

Legislature approves ban on requiring college, tech students to adopt critical race theory tenets

Posted on Tuesday, Feb 22, 2022

The Legislature voted Tuesday along party lines to ban the UW or tech college systems from requiring students to “affirm, adopt, or adhere to” tenets of critical race theory.

The bill is a watered-down version of what was first introduced. SB 409 originally sought to ban teaching things such as that one race or sex is superior to another; someone by virtue of their race is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive; and an individual’s moral character is determined by a person’s race or sex. Backers argued that it would ban the teaching of critical race theory.

Gov. Tony Evers has already vetoed a bill to ban teaching such concepts at the K-12 level.

Sen. Lena Taylor, D-Milwaukee, said the bill is part of a larger GOP effort nationally to prevent the teaching of history and avoid uncomfortable questions about the nation’s past. She chided her GOP colleagues for frequently quoting Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech in which he hoped some day his children would be judged by their character and not the color of their skin. Taylor, who’s Black, reminded her colleagues that King also wrote about institutional racism and the need for “radical change.”

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

She also said racism isn’t ancient history, saying her father in the 1970s was refused service at a gas station in the south and the Green Book was written to tell Black people where they could safely get gas or something to eat while traveling

the country.

“Teaching on racism and sexism, they’re not hateful. They’re just true,” Taylor said.

GOP Sen. André Jacque, one of the bill’s co-authors, countered the bill isn’t about prohibiting the teaching of history, but on indoctrinating students. He pointed to a webinar on sexual violence at UW-Madison that is required for professional or graduate students that requires them to affirm concepts such as whiteness means privilege.

“In other words, this is simply protecting the conscience and again keeping the focus on the fact that we should be teaching history and not requiring people to affirm that which doesn’t follow fact or what they believe,” said Jacque, R-DePere.

UW-Madison Chancellor Rebecca Blank wrote in a November letter to Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester, the purpose of the training is to make sure students understand the concepts, not that they agree with it.

Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-West Point, argued on the floor that there are examples in the Legislature of unconscious racism and sexism. He said Taylor and former Rep. Chris Taylor, D-Madison, were often cut off during their time serving on the Joint Finance Committee by the GOP chairs, while he wasn’t.

“Intentional? No, I don’t think so,” Erpenbach said. “But it happens all the time, and when we fail to recognize that happening, we really do have a problem.”

The bill passed the Senate 21-12 and the Assembly 60-33.

During the Assembly debate, Dems argued that people shouldn’t avoid learning about difficult history just to avoid discomfort.

Rep. Francesca Hong, D-Madison, said that the bill addresses an “imaginary problem” and that it is intended to be divisive.

In response to Republican comments that Wisconsinites do not want to talk about issues the bill is meant to address, Rep. Dora Drake, D-Milwaukee, said that isn’t true and that Black Wisconsinites talk about them every day.

“We live this,” Drake said.

Rep. Scott Allen, R-Waukesha, said in response to Dems that people don't want to be told what they should do, and that they shouldn't have authority "crammed down [their] throats."

Allen said while it could be a good thing to feel uncomfortable when discussing difficult topics, thinking about certain societal issues could exacerbate them.

"If we think about racism, we get more of it. If we think about sexism, we get more of it. If we think about hate, we get more of it," Allen said.

The Senate also signed off via voice vote on AB 414, which backers say would ban using critical race theory concepts in training for state or local government employees. Any local government that violated the proposed ban would lose 10 percent of their shared revenue for the following year. They could get the full amount if they later came into compliance with the requirement.

The Senate also voted along party lines to approve AB 884, which would allow students at the UW System to take a course on the U.S. Constitution to satisfy a requirement that they take a class on diversity or ethnic studies.

All three bills now go to Evers.