

Bill barring race-based programs in higher education heads to Evers after party-line Assembly vote

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The Assembly passed a string of higher education bills along party lines today, including a bill that would strip higher education programs of race-based programs and requirements.

SB 652 would replace references to race with provisions for “disadvantaged” students and eliminate certain race-based programs entirely. It passed 53 to 45 with all Republicans in support and now heads to Gov. Tony Evers.

Rep. Supreme Moore Omokunde, D-Milwaukee, called SB 652 a “ridiculous, racist, culture war bill” intended as catnip for the political right and criticized its exclusion of factors like race, sex, and religion in considering disadvantage.

“You’re either ignorant or mean as hell to suggest that all of these elements, including race and sex, are not interconnected in our society,” Omokunde said.

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Rep. Jim Piwowarczyk, R-Hubertus, argued SB 652 was a “modernizing” bill by shifting its conception of disadvantage away from race and toward socioeconomic factors.

“This bill reinforced the principle that students should be evaluated as individuals while still addressing real disadvantages in a meaningful way,” Piwowarczyk said.

The Assembly also sent to the governor SB 532, which would bar UW institutions from charging fees for exclusively online courses, except when the institution incurs costs that would not otherwise be incurred if the course was in person. The bill

passed 53 to 45 along party lines with all Republicans in support.

Rep. Alex Joers, D-Waunakee, argued the bill would only shift fees elsewhere instead of eliminating the cost and asked lawmakers to instead vote for his bill for a student borrowers' bill of rights.

Rep. Shae Sortwell, R-Two Rivers, accused Democrats of hypocrisy for claiming to care about higher education costs after failing to support his bill barring the UW system from prorating state support for students who received private scholarships.

GOP lawmakers also voted to send AB 1005 to the Senate. That bill would require standardized tests be the "predominant" determinant of entry into the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Democrats, including Rep. Angelina Cruz, a public school teacher, pointed to findings showing that standardized tests more closely predicted family income and access to testing services and unfairly disadvantaged otherwise talented students who tested poorly.

"It narrows the lens through which we see our students. It elevates a single metric, and it reinforces a false and damaging assumption that standardized test scores are an accurate and objective measure of student ability," said the Racine Democrat.

No Republicans rose to speak on the bill, which passed 52-45 along party lines.