

Testimony in Support of House Bill 1503

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Good morning Chairman Schaible and members of the Senate Education Committee. My name is Mark Jorritsma and I am the Executive Director of Family Policy Alliance of North Dakota. I am testifying in support of House Bill 1503 and respectfully request that you render a “DO PASS” on this bill.

Free speech at public universities and colleges is crucial to academic inquiry, and only free and robust discussion of critical issues will drive the quest for truth. That said, public institutions of higher learning are often places where people with strongly held contradictory views are in close proximity and vocal about their positions on these issues.

The subject of academic freedom of expression often rears its head when discussions shift to matters such as political positions, abortion, religion, and sexual orientation – the same contentious issues in our greater national landscape. These issues are debated with free speech in the larger societal arenas such as the media, political rallies, marches, and other modern “public squares”. There is no outcry for any free speech zones on the basis of these positions. Why then does it make sense to strangle free speech and create hurdles to the active discussion of these issues in places where inquiry and original thought should be most encouraged – higher education?

Over the years, the issue of free expression has taken on a general countenance of speech codes. However, more recently, the subject has given rise to safe spaces, trigger warnings, and enhanced fears of “microaggressions”. Political correctness is winning over free speech.

I remember those late-night talks about “big issues”. You had lengthy debates with your roommates, friends, and sometimes professors about topics such as communism vs. capitalism, the existence of God, self-actualization of the person, and other life-shaping issues. You debated, sometimes hotly, and listened to each other while you drank coffee at 2am and avoided studying for that exam. Why? Because these things mattered, and they still do.

But here is the important part. When it was all over and time to head to bed, whether or not anyone's mind was changed, academic freedom had been exercised and you had often learned as much or more than if you had studied for that exam. Your mind was now considering new points of view. And you were all still best friends because, although it was an important subject, nobody took it personally.

The hotly contended issues we deal with today are frankly no harder or easier than they were 20, 50, or 100 years ago, and we are fooling ourselves and frankly a bit arrogant if we think so. Let's ensure that common sense, respectful debate, and discussion of society's important issues is free and encouraged in all places, including our institutions of higher learning. Some of the greatest minds of past centuries developed their foundational principles during their college years. Let's not lose that, or we will create a generation that shirks from issues, mollifies rather than stands for their beliefs, and chooses comfort over truth.

I ask you then, please protect these freedoms on our state's campuses of higher education and vote House Bill 1503 out of committee with a "DO PASS" recommendation. Thank you and I would now be happy to stand for any questions.