

March 6, 2023

Dear Chairman Heinert and members of the House Education Committee,

I write to you as a ND constituent with children I hope will attend ND colleges in the near future, and also as an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at UND. I am writing today as an individual citizen and ask that you give SB 2247 – originally the “divisive” concepts bill but now amended to be a “specified” concepts bill (although the concepts listed did not change) – a DO NOT PASS recommendation in your committee and also ask that you vote against this bill.

The language of the bill suggests that students, faculty, and staff are required to assent to or endorse the specified concepts listed, are required to submit to training that includes the specified concepts, and/or incentivized to include the specified concepts in our curriculum. But no evidence is provided of this because it simply doesn't exist – as a professor I have never required my students to assent to any particular belief (let alone the concepts listed in the bill), and as an employee I have never been required to participate in a training that includes a requirement that I assent to the specified concepts listed in the legislation.

Beyond this, I'd like to address some of the concerns that the only person who has submitted testimony in support of this bill (to date, besides the bill's sponsor) has raised. In her testimony, Mrs. Vibeto points to examples of politically liberal professors, books, and programs and argues that institutions of higher education are indoctrinating students. She believes legislation like this is somehow a solution to that.

Knowing that we have students who may not fall on the same side of the political spectrum as ourselves, my colleagues and I generally go out of our way not to share our own political viewpoints and we most certainly never require our students to disclose their own political preferences, although they sometimes do (in class and in their work). Because we live in such a highly politicized society and era, I actually take time in many of my classes to talk about and look at data on how people's perspectives on whatever it is we are talking about that week vary along the political spectrum. I also ask students to consider *why* people's ideas might differ by their politics. I do this because it helps students to understand why political differences exist and it also helps to build understanding of others.

As a professor, my colleagues and I work very hard to provide students with a wide range of perspectives. When we talk about complex and controversial issues, we often go out of our way to talk about the arguments of both proponents and critics. This is intentional because it is important to us, as educators, to help students develop the skills necessary to articulate nuanced and well-reasoned arguments, which isn't possible if we avoid delving into complicated topics and opposing viewpoints.

Let me provide an example. I teach a class on social change and movements. Knowing that social movements are often very politicized, we spend time talking about that politicization. As we consider specific movements, we also take time to talk about any counter-movements operating in opposition to them. Understanding a counter-movement can actually help students understand the original movement (and vice-versa). Students are given the chance to select a social movement they will focus on over the course of the semester to write about. This semester I have a student writing about a very active contemporary social movement that has wide-spread support among political conservatives. I also have another student writing about the counter-movement, which tends to be endorsed by political liberals. On the last assignment

the student who is writing about the politically conservative movement got a better grade than the student writing about the politically liberal counter-movement. Why? Because they did a better job of following the assignment instructions and making a compelling argument. Their personal political preferences – and mine – did not factor into how their assignment was graded. My colleagues and I actually work very hard to be self-reflective in acknowledging our biases (both political and otherwise) and actively utilize grading criteria that limit the influence of our biases. A college education seeks to help students develop these skills as well.

Beyond the walls of my own classroom, research shows that getting a college education doesn't actually lead significant numbers of students to change their political perspectives, and in fact, many students' existing political beliefs are generally strengthened over the course of their education. I believe this is because in college students learn the skills to better articulate and support their beliefs. Rather than indoctrinating students, access to higher education helps students to develop a greater understanding of and sympathy for those who they may not agree with (see [here](#)).

Mrs. Vibeto also provides an example of a contentious interaction at a university elsewhere and believes legislation like this is a solution to that. But such examples of public confrontations on college campuses are not happening in North Dakota and this legislation wouldn't do anything to prevent such conflicts should they arise. Why? Because of the First Amendment and the right to freedom of speech.

In short, this legislation is simply unnecessary as the North Dakota University System (NDUS), and each institution, currently have in place policies that prohibit discrimination based on a person's political beliefs or other traits, and procedures for addressing any incidents of suspected discrimination. In addition to being unnecessary, this legislation would create a significant financial burden for the NDUS and its campuses, with little benefit or effect. This funding could be better spent on student activities and programming that support student learning, understanding of others, and growth.

If we want a society, and state, where our citizens are able to engage in thoughtful, respectful, and nuanced discussions of complicated issues, then we must not fall into the trap of passing legislation like SB 2247 which attempts to restrict certain concepts or ideas – no matter how well intentioned those restrictions are.

I appreciate your willingness to serve in our state legislature and ask, respectfully, that you give SB 2247 a "do NOT pass" recommendation and vote NO on it.

Sincerely,

Liz Legerski