

Olivia Data
Testimony on SB 2247
January 23, 2023

RE: Testimony in Opposition of SB 2247

Good morning, Chairman Elkin and members of the committee. My name is Olivia Data, I am the Youth Action Council Coordinator for the North Dakota Women's Network, and I am writing to you today to urge you to vote "Do Not Pass" on SB 2247.

The Youth Action Council is an organization that works to empower the youth of North Dakota and involve high school and college kids in civic engagement. One of our most important values as an organization has always been education. We believe that if we want a brighter future, younger generations must not only have access to education, but the encouragement to seek out answers to our questions and develop a love for learning.

We absolutely agree that everyone has a right to their own beliefs and their own values, and we do not support forcing anyone to change those beliefs or values in order to be accepted into the communities of higher education. However, SB 2247 does not protect our freedom of belief so much as it casts a shadow of doubt and discord over higher education.

While every student should have the right to safely and confidently express diverse beliefs, students should also have the right to assemble with other like minded students. SB 2247 poses a threat to this right. If, for example, a liberal student wanted to join a group for conservative students just to disagree with all their points at each meeting, SB 2247 would force the conservative students to accept this interruption or be liable for their adverse treatment of another student.

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And while universities should absolutely encourage respectful dissent and diverse opinions within classrooms, they must also encourage a deference to facts. By forming such a broad and subjective definition of divisive concepts, SB 2247 protects radical opinions over facts and logic. If a professor were to teach about segregation in the 1960's, they could be punished for implying that White people had privilege over Black people. If a university offered a course on philosophy behind different economic structures, it would be nearly impossible to test students without being accused of promoting division between classes.

The dangers of SB 2247 are endless. This bill could complicate training employees about how to provide accommodations for disabled students. It could complicate forming curriculum about vital historical events or sanctioning student organizations.

I am a freshman at Harvard College. My ability to discuss and learn about difficult and divisive topics has been crucial to my college experience so far. I am able to take classes about political divisions and social movements without wondering if my professors are misrepresenting the topics. I am able to join organizations that promote equality on campus without having to cater to those who want to disrupt our advocacy. This is not to say that I want or expect homogeneity of thought on campus. In fact, I strongly believe that in order to preserve our democratic values and truly celebrate education, we have to be able to disagree with each other. But there is a difference between fostering diversity of thought and threatening anyone who would dare to discuss a controversial subject. Professors cannot teach if they are afraid of stepping out of line. Students cannot learn if we are not able to hear the truth.

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If we want to create a world in which our citizens are well-informed and able to peacefully and respectfully disagree with one another, we cannot shut down education. Please, let us build a future in which professors can educate their students without fear and students are encouraged to think critically and respect the facts. I urge you to vote “Do Not Pass” on SB 2247.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have about my testimony.

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