

Chairman Elkin and members of the Committee,

My name is Faith Wahl, and I currently serve as the Student Body President at the University of North Dakota. The University of North Dakota currently educates over 13,000 students throughout the state and country. UND Student Government has representatives from all nine academic colleges and is a group that is elected by students to represent their voices at the campus, local, and state level. I am here this morning to represent those voices and testify in opposition of SB 2247 relating to divisive concepts at institutions of higher education. I want to ensure that the student perspective is considered and share the negative implications that this bill may have on higher education students in North Dakota.

At this time, when a student attends college in North Dakota, they are protected in their free speech rights and have the opportunity to listen to the perspectives of others, engage in critical dialogue around difficult concepts, and disagree with each other. At UND, having critical conversations and expressing disagreement is not only accepted, but encouraged. By limiting what concepts are taught, it creates barriers toward free thinking. When a student has the opportunity to learn differing viewpoints, worldviews, and discuss it with others, they then can ask questions and debate with each other, and engage in learning and discovery. Additionally, this further prepares students for the workforce in which they will encounter countless individuals who do not always agree with their viewpoints. If students are not equipped with the ability to have respectful conversations, challenge their current viewpoints, and take time to listen to others, the state is educating individuals who are unable to engage in original thinking.

Beyond what implications this bill has about the ability to engage with others and present evidence-based opinions, it infringes upon academic freedom, which is one of the core tenants of

higher education throughout North Dakota and the United States. According to an *Inside Higher Ed* article titled “Defining Academic Freedom” published in 2010, academic freedom is when “both faculty members and students can engage in an intellectual debate without fear of censorship or retaliation.” The sixteen divisive concepts outlined in SB 2247 have strong connections to several academic disciplines, including biology, history, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, healthcare, and others. If faculty and students are not able to engage in critical discussion, research, and debate around these topics; the educational quality in these classes and programs will suffer greatly as a result. Mandating what an institution can and cannot teach begins to infringe on one’s first amendment rights, particularly freedom of speech and freedom of expression. This bill would set a dangerous precedent not only for our state but for our country as well.

Another concern related to this bill is the unclear definition of “training” in section 15-10.6.03. In order to educate and prepare students and employees to work with diverse groups of people, these teaching materials are crucial to their education and jobs and the expectations that follow. Without the ability to complete the necessary onboarding processes and give students opportunities to learn something outside of their own culture and beliefs, a student’s opportunity for a comprehensive education is limited.

Lastly, I want to share a couple of personal experiences about my time in higher education thus far. I am currently in the second semester of my senior year at UND and took college classes for credit through Bismarck State College while in high school. Throughout my seven years in the North Dakota University System, I have never felt unable to express my opinions, ask questions, and challenge what is being taught in the classroom. I fear that if this bill receives a Do Pass recommendation and is passed on the Senate floor, this will no longer be the

case. As students, we want to live and work in a state where our individual freedoms are not only protected but also respected. Furthermore, I have heard numerous faculty members express their concerns on the passing of this bill and their desire to move and teach elsewhere if it is passed. In order to recruit and retain students to be a part of North Dakota's workforce, economy, and livelihood, this bill should not be passed. I urge you all to consider a Do Not Pass recommendation on SB 2247. I am happy to answer any questions you may have and thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully Submitted,

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