

Indiana lawmakers continue to work aggressively in the current session of the General Assembly to solve "problems" that don't exist.

Among perplexing pieces of legislation this year is a controversial bill targeting higher education. Proponents say the bill would ensure university faculty are encouraging the fuzzy concept of "intellectual diversity," meeting adequate performance expectations and refraining from pushing political views in the classroom that are unrelated to the scholar's expertise.

Republican state Sen. Spencer Deery of West Lafayette authored the bill — S.B. 202. Deery thinks it is needed because he believes conservative views and voices are discouraged and discriminated against in the halls of academia. He produces no evidence to support such claims, but says perceptions concerning his grievances against higher education institutions are real.

The bill would instruct diversity committees to consider "intellectual diversity" as well as cultural diversity in employment policies and handling of faculty complaints.

But it doesn't stop there. According to an Indiana Capital Chronicle report, the committees would be instructed to promote recruitment and retention of "underrepresented" students rather than the "minority students" specified by current law. It would also change tenure and promotion policies for faculty, requiring boards to "prevent a faculty member from getting tenure or a promotion if the board thinks the member is 'unlikely to foster a culture of free inquiry, free expression and intellectual diversity' and unlikely to offer students scholarly works from a range of 'political or ideological frameworks.'"

Tenured professors would also be reviewed every five years based on the new provisions. If they fail the reviews, they could face termination, demotion, salary cuts and more.

The bill represents increased intrusion by the legislature into the administration of institutions of higher education, all because someone perceives that their ideological point of view did not receive the degree of respect they thought it deserved.

With Republicans holding legislative super majorities, the bill passed the Senate in a party-line vote earlier in the session. The same occurred in the House on Tuesday, although amendments were added. Differences in the bills are being resolved and could be headed to the governor's desk soon.

In addition to Democrats, faculty groups and administrators at state universities are pushing back.

Opponents complain that the bill is similar to those passed by Republican super majorities in other states where the results have not been good. Indiana State University professor Lindsey Eberman, who has protested against the bill at the Statehouse, says this legislative overreach will be detrimental to the state.

"We intend to make sure the legislature knows they will be held accountable for when this creates chaos, decreases enrollment and has the economic impact that we're seeing in other states who are experiencing bills like this," Eberman said.

Hidden behind language purporting to be upholding First Amendment rights is the real issue of conservative, culture-war intrusion into an academic process that is already tightly governed by college administrators and trustees.

State Rep. Tonya Pfaff, a Terre Haute Democrat who herself is an educator and represents a district that includes ISU, is blunt in her assessment of the bill.

"This legislation is just a heavy-handed attempt at censoring discussion of topics that some may find offensive," Pfaff said. "A crucial part of the college experience is being exposed to difficult truths."

Little can be done in a super majority legislature to stop unnecessary bills such as this. Gov. Eric Holcomb would be wise to draw attention to the adverse impacts it could have on the state when it reaches his desk. A veto would be in order.

Copyright 2024, Greensburg Daily News / CNHI, LLC. All Rights Reserved.