



Tuesday, February 7, 2006

## House panel approves university diversity plan

By CHET BROKAW, Associated Press Writer

PIERRE, S.D. South Dakota's public universities should be required to file annual reports to show how they are ensuring academic freedom and promoting differing points of view on their campuses, a state House Committee decided Tuesday.

The Education Committee voted 10-5 to approve a measure that requires the six state universities to file reports to the Legislature on what they are doing to ensure intellectual diversity.

The measure's main sponsor, Rep. Phyllis Heineman, R-Sioux Falls, said HB1222 is needed to make sure students are exposed to a diverse range of ideas.

Members of the Legislature are invigorated by debate, and the same idea should apply on campuses, Heineman said. "It's not because we agree. It's because we disagree, and that's where we learn."

But opponents said South Dakota universities already encourage intellectual diversity, and passage of the bill could give South Dakota a bad reputation that makes it difficult for schools to hire good instructors.

Other measures seeking to guarantee a wide spectrum of views in the classroom have been discussed in a number of states. Those measures are generally promoted by conservatives.

Anne Neal of the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** said universities should encourage an exchange of ideas from a variety of political and ideological viewpoints.

"It encourages students to think for themselves," Neal said.

Neal said her organization conducted a survey of students at 50 universities from across the nation, and 49 percent said some professors commented on politics in class even if it was outside the class subject matter. The study found that nearly a third of the students thought that in some courses they needed to agree with a professor's political or social views to get a good grade.

"Encouraging a robust exchange of ideas goes to the very heart of a quality education," Neal said.

Tad Perry, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents, said the study conducted by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni** focused on universities that are very different than South Dakota's schools. The measure was proposed by a group with a particular political outlook to have South Dakota deal with a purported national problem, he said.

"South Dakota higher education is not the problem," Perry said.

The regents already have a policy on intellectual diversity and academic freedom, so the bill is not needed, Perry said. Preparation of the reports that would be required by the bill would take up staff time at the universities, he said.

Ron Utecht, a professor of chemistry and biochemistry at South Dakota State University, said he has never talked about his political beliefs in the classroom during his 18 years of teaching. He said he has never heard of students or faculty members getting into trouble for their political or religious beliefs.

However, Utecht said he fears that if the bill becomes law, it would send the wrong message about South Dakota's university system. "This bill would make it more difficult to hire faculty."

Utecht, head of the faculty union, said he also believes some students who get bad grades would file false claims that they were treated unfairly because of their beliefs.

Rep. Tom Hills, R-Spearfish, a retired professor from Black Hills State University, said the bill is not needed because state universities have no problems. He said in his many years at the university, he had to deal with only one case in which a faculty member let political views interfere with his class.

Heineman said her bill only requires universities to report what they have done to ensure diverse views can be expressed on campus. "We're saying to our universities, tell us your story."