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Political-Bias Bill Passes S.D. House

By JENNIFER JACOBSON

The South Dakota House of Representatives voted last week to require the state's public colleges to report annually on steps they have taken to ensure intellectual diversity and the free exchange of ideas on their campuses.

The bill, HB 1222, passed by a vote of 42 to 26. Rep. Phyllis M. Heineman, a Republican, sponsored the legislation, which defines intellectual diversity as "the foundation of a learning environment that exposes students to a variety of political, ideological, and other perspectives." Forty of those who voted in favor and 10 who voted against the bill were also Republicans.

The bill "basically says that we as a legislature, we value intellectual diversity for our students and faculty, and it asks for a report to tell us how we're accomplishing that," Ms. Heineman said during debate on the House floor.

A state higher-education official, however, criticized the legislation soon after it passed. "Unfortunately, it sends the message to the higher-education community that there are problems in South Dakota that need political intrusion to solve," said Robert T. (Tad) Perry, executive director of the South Dakota Board of Regents. "Nothing could be farther from the truth."

The bill passed at a time when Republican lawmakers in several state legislatures have introduced a measure, known as the "academic bill of rights," that they say will make college campuses more intellectually diverse. No state legislature so far has passed the measure, which has been promoted by the conservative activist David Horowitz.

But those efforts have brought national attention to the issue of whether academe is rife with leftists who bring their ideology into the classroom and seek every opportunity to teach it to their students. Pennsylvania lawmakers are holding hearings on whether conservative students at the state's public universities are discriminated against, and if government intervention is consequently warranted.

The South Dakota bill suggests a variety of steps by which

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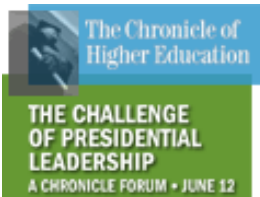
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institutions can show that they are promoting multiple views. The steps include incorporating intellectual diversity into institutional statements and grievance procedures, encouraging a balanced variety of campus speakers, and hiring an ombudsman to look into questions of intellectual diversity.

Each institution would have to post its report on its Web site.

Those who believe that academe leans to the left hailed the legislation. "This is a major step forward to supporting intellectual diversity and academic freedom," said Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, who testified in support of the bill.

The measure, she said, is based on "Intellectual Diversity: Time for Action," a report that her organization released last month. Ms. Neal said Ms. Heineman had sought the council's guidance on the issue after a constituent complained to her about intimidation in the classroom.

The South Dakota Senate, which, like the House, is dominated by Republicans, is expected to vote on the bill by the end of February.

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