



Senate Committee on Universities & Technical Colleges

2025 Senate Bill 498

Free speech and academic freedom at University of Wisconsin System institutions and technical colleges

October 15, 2025

Chair Hutton and Members of the Senate Committee on Universities & Technical Colleges:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today for information only on Senate Bill 498 related to free speech and academic freedom at University of Wisconsin System institutions and technical colleges.

The free exchange of ideas on college campuses is fundamental to the mission of higher education. Whether the goal is to build the workforce of the future, advance groundbreaking research and technology, or cultivate well-rounded individuals, a wide-ranging spectrum of thought and viewpoint diversity is essential. It challenges students and faculty alike to engage across differences and approach complex issues from new perspectives. We would like to thank the authors for their deep commitment to this vital pillar of our institution.

Engaging a deeply held value or conviction across a divide can sometimes feel personal, quickly become emotional, and certainly be uncomfortable. Yet, it is in these moments that real growth, understanding, and progress can be made. This type of dialogue is a skill, and like all skills, it needs to be repeated and challenged to develop and master.

UW-Madison is committed to improving the environment for speech and debate on campus. We have made progress on a number of fronts to create more spaces and expectations for how students engage across differences. These efforts are described in more detail below.

The university adopted new policies to ensure free expression and the ability of students to access education without disruption. UW-Madison also created supporting documents clearly outlining actions protected by the First Amendment and the reasonable time, place and manner limitations, established by university policy and state law, that protect the university's educational environment from disruption.

All new incoming freshman and transfer students are now required to complete a multi-part free expression training module. This training details key concepts such as civil discourse, academic

freedom, as well as the First Amendment's protections for offensive speech and protest. UW-Madison also routinely conducts a campus climate survey, providing students with an opportunity to share their thoughts, experiences, and concerns about campus. The results help the university enhance campus programs and services to foster a campus environment where everyone feels like they belong.

Students are also taking the initiative to help build a more inclusive environment for their peers to share ideas. BridgeMadison, a bipartisan student group, facilitates discussions around polarizing policy topics. Just two weeks ago, they hosted an on-campus event with a bipartisan group of legislators and facilitated both a panel discussion and a "mixer" that included students engaging with the legislative guests and one another. In addition, undergraduate students are invited to participate in Deliberation Dinners, a program sponsored by the Chancellor's Office designed to bring together ideologically and demographically diverse groups of peers to discuss significant political issues. These discussions help students develop the ability to analyze challenging and authentic political issues, improve their speaking and listening skills, and come to recognize the importance of considering multiple and competing views. Deliberation Dinners has expanded this year to include more undergraduates, and there is great interest in the program.

To be clear, underlying these efforts is a strong infrastructure built on accountability. The Board of Regents explicitly prohibits discrimination and ensures equal opportunity for its students outlined in sections 14 and 17 of its policies. State statute also makes clear "no student may be denied admission to, participation in or the benefits of, or be discriminated against in any service, program, course or facility of the system or its institutions" based on race, color, creed, religion, sex, national origin, disability, ancestry, age, sexual orientation, pregnancy, marital status or parental status. The university is also already required to comply with the First Amendment and relevant case law. There are already ample legal remedies available for students and others who believe these important rights have been violated.

As currently drafted, Senate Bill 498 potentially undermines this strong system built to safeguard free speech. The bill allows for unintended adverse claims that have the potential for abuse. Moreover, it introduces inconsistency with constitutional protections for freedom of expression. It does not clearly distinguish between legitimate First Amendment violations and claims made to punish the institution for political reasons. Additionally, the terms "employee groups" and "external recognized groups" are vague and undefined. The statutory language regarding due process is also unclear, creating ambiguity for institutions as they work to uphold students' rights and maintain a campus environment that encourages open expression.

As the state's public flagship institution of higher education, UW-Madison strives to provide a world-class education that better the lives of all citizens across the state. This mission rests on a strong foundation of free speech and a range of viewpoints, and we are committed to these principles in order to improve these ideals. Thank you again for the opportunity to provide

information on Senate Bill 498. If you have questions, please reach out to Crystal Potts or Mitch Goettl (crystal.potts@wisc.edu; goettl@wisc.edu).