

7 October 2021

Dear Rep. Murphy and Rep. Hesselbein,

I write on behalf of the members of AFT-Wisconsin's thirteen unions of higher education workers, and I write in strong opposition to A.B. 413, a bill that purports to "prohibit race and sex stereotyping to students in University of Wisconsin institutions." This bill is a solution in search of a problem that appears to seek political points at the expense of a highly valuable public institution: the UW system. Indeed, this bill would not only do the opposite of what it proposes to do—prevent stereotyping based on race and gender—but it would also threaten the promise of academic freedom and the pursuit of truth that has made our system of public higher education one of the best in the nation.

First, the substance of the bill: A.B. 413 implies that faculty and staff in the UW system are currently teaching our students to stereotype based on race and gender. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the mission statements of virtually every UW campus emphasize our commitment to diversity, and that includes race and gender. The mission of my campus, UW-Green Bay, for example, points out that "the culture and vision of the University reflect a deep commitment to diversity, inclusion, social justice, civic engagement, and educational opportunity." So, of course, our faculty and staff value racial and gender diversity, and certainly do not teach that students should be stereotyped based on their identity.

The notion that faculty and staff are "stereotyping" people based on race and gender in this bill, it appears to me, is based on the assumption that certain instruction, some of which interrogates issues of institutional racism or sexism in American history and/or contemporary society, is somehow responsible for blaming individuals for broader systemic problems. Critical interrogation of American institutions—past and present—does no such thing. In fact, understanding our world is a step *in the direction of* eliminating harmful stereotypes in our society.

This isn't even the most destructive aspect of this bill, however. Indeed, A.B. 413 represents a fundamental threat to the academic freedom that is central to the mission of the US system. Back in 1894, the UW Board of Regents famously asserted, "*Whatever may be the limitations which trammel inquiry elsewhere, we believe that the great state University of Wisconsin should ever encourage that continual and fearless sifting and winnowing by which alone the truth can be found.*"

This bill directly threatens that search for truth, encouraging students and university employees to engage in civil actions against the UW system, potentially exposing the system to a number of frivolous lawsuits. On our campuses, we value teaching about controversial subjects and considering the many different perspectives of our students, in all their ideological diversity. Chilling academic freedom and free speech on campus as this bill proposes to do runs counter to the atmosphere I am certain all members of this committee want to see on campus.

Thank you, in advance, for considering this statement. Feel free to pass it on to the other members of your respective caucuses on the committee, and do not hesitate to contact me with follow-up questions.

Sincerely yours,

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