

Wednesday, March 23, 2005 2:00 am
From the *Independent Florida Alligator Online*

Capitol bill aims to control 'leftist' profs

THE LAW COULD LET STUDENTS SUE FOR UNTOLERATED BELIEFS.

By [JAMES VANLANDINGHAM](#)
Alligator Staff Writer

TALLAHASSEE — Republicans on the House Choice and Innovation Committee voted along party lines Tuesday to pass a bill that aims to stamp out “leftist totalitarianism” by “dictator professors” in the classrooms of Florida’s universities.

The Academic Freedom Bill of Rights, sponsored by Rep. Dennis Baxley, R-Ocala, passed 8-to-2 despite strenuous objections from the only two Democrats on the committee.

The bill has two more committees to pass before it can be considered by the full House.

While promoting the bill Tuesday, Baxley said a university education should be more than “one biased view by the professor, who as a dictator controls the classroom,” as part of “a misuse of their platform to indoctrinate the next generation with their own views.”

The bill sets a statewide standard that students cannot be punished for professing beliefs with which their professors disagree. Professors would also be advised to teach alternative “serious academic theories” that may disagree with their personal views.

According to a legislative staff analysis of the bill, the law would give students who think their beliefs are not being respected legal standing to sue professors and universities.

Students who believe their professor is singling them out for “public ridicule” – for instance, when professors use the Socratic method to force students to explain their theories in class – would also be given the right to sue.

“Some professors say, ‘Evolution is a fact. I don’t want to hear about Intelligent Design (a creationist theory), and if you don’t like it, there’s the door,’” Baxley said, citing one example when he thought a student should sue.

Rep. Dan Gelber, D-Miami Beach, warned of lawsuits from students enrolled in Holocaust history courses who believe the Holocaust never happened.

Similar suits could be filed by students who don’t believe astronauts landed on the moon, who believe teaching birth control is a sin or even by Shands medical students who refuse to perform blood transfusions and believe prayer is the only way to heal the body, Gelber added.

“This is a horrible step,” he said. “Universities will have to hire lawyers so our curricula can be decided by judges in courtrooms. Professors might have to pay court costs — even if they win — from their own pockets. This is not an innocent piece of legislation.”

The staff analysis also warned the bill may shift responsibility for determining whether a student’s freedom has been infringed from the faculty to the courts.

But Baxley brushed off Gelber’s concerns. “Freedom is a dangerous thing, and you might be exposed to things you don’t want to hear,” he said. “Being a businessman, I found out you can be sued for anything. Besides, if students are being persecuted and ridiculed for their beliefs, I think they should be given standing to sue.”

During the committee hearing, Baxley cast opposition to his bill as “leftists” struggling against “mainstream society.”

“The critics ridicule me for daring to stand up for students and faculty,” he said, adding that he was called a McCarthyist.

Baxley later said he had a list of students who were discriminated against by professors, but refused to reveal names because he felt they would be persecuted.

Rep. Eleanor Sobel, D-Hollywood, argued universities and the state Board of Governors already have policies in place to protect academic freedom. Moreover, a state law outlining how professors are supposed to teach would encroach on the board’s authority to manage state schools.

“The big hand of state government is going into the universities telling them how to teach,” she said. “This bill is the antithesis of academic freedom.”

But Baxley compared the state’s universities to children, saying the legislature should not give them money without providing “guidance” to their behavior.

“Professors are accountable for what they say or do,” he said. “They’re accountable to the rest of us in society ... All of a sudden the faculty think they can do what they want and shut us out. Why is it so unheard of to say the professor shouldn’t be a dictator and control that room as their totalitarian niche?”

In an interview before the meeting, Baxley said “arrogant, elitist academics are swarming” to oppose the bill, and media reports misrepresented his intentions.

“I expect to be out there on my own pretty far,” he said. “I don’t expect to be part of a team.”

House Bill H-837 can be viewed online at www.flsenate.gov.

Copyright © 1996–2005 [Alligator Online](#) and Campus Communications.