

HB 1518 -- STUDENT ASSOCIATIONS AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

SPONSOR: Hudson

COMMITTEE ACTION: Voted "Do Pass" by the Special Committee on Government Accountability by a vote of 8 to 6.

This bill defines "adverse action", "belief-based student association", and "benefit" and prohibits public institutions of higher learning from taking any action or enforcing any policy that denies a belief-based student association benefits available to other student associations.

The bill prohibits discrimination against a belief-based student association based on its requirement that leaders of the association adhere to its sincerely held beliefs, sincere practice requirements, or standards of conduct.

The bill authorizes aggrieved belief-based student associations to seek appropriate relief in a judicial or administrative proceeding against a public institution of higher learning that violates the requirements of the bill.

This bill is the same HB 136 (2023) and HB 1724 (2022).

PROPOSERS: Supporters say that this bill provides clarity to universities in the state on what protections belief-based associations have on campus. The bill is similar to language adopted in other states and will provide a clear standard for associations to point to while preventing potential litigation.

Testifying in person for the bill were Representative Hudson; Missouri Catholic Conference; Curtis Cole, Chi Alpha Campus Ministries, USA; 1st Amendment Partnership; Armorvine; and Xitong Bai.

OPPOSERS: Those who oppose the bill say that this bill is discriminatory in its nature, and that certain religious tenets are inflammatory. Public dollars should not be spent to promote or authorize discrimination, and this bill will allow clubs to exist on campus with leadership that espouses these views. Student groups have the opportunity to elect their leadership and should be allowed to choose whichever leaders they want without such restrictions.

The opponents also say that the government's interference in the operations of student groups constitutes overreach, contending that this bill infringes upon the First Amendment rights of the students.

Testifying in person against the bill were Americans United for Separation of Church and State; Missouri NEA; Brian Kaylor, Word&Way; Joseph Albert Jefferies; PROMO & Mo State NAACP; Thomas Way, The Missouri Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers; Dava-Leigh Brush, Moeep-A; Michael Walk; Zaria Chaney; Dr. Susan Shelby; Jess Harman; Abortion Action Missouri (Formerly Pro Choice Missouri); Advocates of Planned Parenthood of the St. Louis Region and Southwest Missouri; and the ACLU of Missouri.

Written testimony has been submitted for this bill. The full written testimony and witnesses testifying online can be found under Testimony on the bill page on the House website.