

“Protect IU from 202” Press Conference, 8/26/24

Sarah Phillips (Anthropology) remarks

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining this press conference to launch the “Protect IU from 202” campaign.

My name is Sarah Phillips, and I have been a faculty member at IU Bloomington for 21 years. A cultural anthropologist, I teach in the department of Anthropology and the Human Biology program.

My scholarship focuses on the experiences of people who came of age under repressive authoritarian regimes of the former Soviet bloc. People who were told what they could and could not read, write, and teach. Artists, writers, and teachers whose rights to free expression were squelched, their work censored. People who never knew when they were being watched and by whom, who they could trust, and who would “report on them” to the authorities.

These individuals and their stories inspire me as I raise my voice to Protect IU from 202. SEA 202 is not about protecting diversity of thought and inquiry; it is about limiting it. As such, it is an attack on students, and it does them a huge disservice. SEA 202 is an attack on faculty members’ free speech and students’ rights to learn unencumbered by state-sponsored censorship.

Classrooms are spaces of inquiry, critical engagement, and the exchange of ideas*, not spaces of suspicion and fear. Classrooms are participatory spaces for the sharing of knowledge*, not spaces of censorship and sanction. SEA 202, which invites students to submit complaints about those faculty they believe fail to “ensure free expression and intellectual diversity,” undermines a student’s role as an active, exploratory learner. Instead of experiencing the freedom to consider and try on new ideas, students become classroom police.

Scared professors cannot nourish students’ curiosity. Scared professors cannot help students develop their skills of critical thinking. Scared professors cannot nurture students as engaged, active citizens. Scared professors cannot engage deeply with students in community. All that scared professors can do is self-censor and disengage from the real, bold business of teaching and learning.

I think back to my friends who grew up in authoritarian Soviet states, with limits on their rights to free speech and expression. They were unable to trust institutions and fellow human beings. They lived with surveillance from neighbors, colleagues, and yes, students. They described themselves as “scared citizens.”

The Hoosier author Kurt Vonnegut Jr. once said:

“Our freedom to say or write whatever we please in this country is holy to me. It is a rare privilege not only on this planet, but throughout the universe, I suspect. And it is not something somebody gave us. It is a thing we give to ourselves.”**

I refuse to give back my freedoms. I refuse to be a scared citizen, and I refuse to be a scared professor. Our students deserve better. Let's all work together to Save IU from 202.

END

*Gratitude to bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

Gratitude to KV, Palm Sunday

Other points:

SEA 202 undermines the system of tenure. If found guilty of violating the law's definition of "intellectual diversity," possible consequences include termination, demotion, salary reduction, or "other disciplinary action." A mandatory five-year review will assess each faculty member's track record of "fostering a culture of free inquiry, free expression and intellectual diversity within the institution." The process and criteria for review are extremely poorly defined and cast a chill on our constitutional rights.