

Iowa signs campus religious liberty, free speech bill into law

One of The FAMiLY LEADER's top legislative priorities this session was signed into law Wednesday, March 27. SF274, also known as the FORUM Act, secures free speech and religious liberty protections to students at Iowa's public colleges and universities.

TFL Vice President and Chief Counsel Chuck Hurley called the law's signing "fabulous news for all Iowans."



Renee Aamodt, Gov. Reynolds, and Chuck Hurley

"This is the best religious liberty bill that's passed [in Iowa] in my 29 years here on Capitol Hill," remarked TFL Vice President Chuck Hurley. "It does way more than secure religious liberty – it's great for free speech and freedom of association. I hope this bill goes around the country."

"The bill ensures that our public universities and community

colleges are places where all members of the campus community are free to speak and express themselves,” explained Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds during the signature ceremony. “This bill mandates that the Board of Regents and the board of each community college adopt a robust intellectual freedom and free expression policy. It also prohibits the school from denying any benefit to a student organization just because the organization requires that its student leaders agree with and support the organization’s beliefs and mission.”

“This law codifies what should be known from the First Amendment of the United States Constitution,” explained the bill’s Senate floor leader, Sen. Amy Sinclair. “It provides protections for students in their freedom of assembly, religion, and speech, and it provides mechanism for recourse if it doesn’t happen. I couldn’t be more excited about this bill passing into law today.”

Among those present for the signing were key legislators, members of TFL Capitol Team, and college students celebrating the new law.



Jacob Schrader is student government senator at Iowa State University who wrote a resolution endorsing the FORUM Act.

“This is a really important bill that guarantees students’ rights to freedom of speech and freedom of assembly are adequately protected at our public universities,” Schrader told TFL. “As we’ve seen recently at the University of Iowa, that’s not always the case. So this is a really good bill that we shouldn’t have had to pass, but we have now passed. I’m very happy about it.”

As TFL reported earlier, the FORUM Act became one of TFL’s top legislative priorities after an incident in 2017 in which the University of Iowa attempted to disband a Christian campus student organization called Business Leaders in Christ, or BLinC. The University had demanded the organization conform its statement of beliefs to permit an openly homosexual student to serve in leadership.

BLinC ultimately won a lawsuit against the University, when a federal judge ruled the University had applied its Human Rights Policy “selectively” – meaning it had granted exceptions to some secular groups, but clamped down on religious groups.

The FORUM Act now sets into Iowa code that public institutions of higher learning may not deny students their First Amendment rights to speech, religion, and association because the University disagrees with the students’ viewpoint. The bill would thus protect student organizations like BLinC – or organizations of other faiths or no faith – from discrimination based on their beliefs.

The bill faced an uphill battle, but eventually won the support of a bipartisan majority in the Iowa Senate. The Republican majority was joined by a handful of Democrats in passing SF274 by a vote of 35-11.

“A university has to accommodate a universe of beliefs,” affirmed Sen. Herman Quirnbach (D-Ames). “And this bill, with its very strong protections for free speech ... does that very,

very well.”

The bill was then passed by the Iowa House on March 14, before being sent on to the governor’s desk.