

## LEGAL REVIEW NOTE

**Bill No.:** HB 349

**LC#:** LC 2479, To Legal Review Copy, as  
of February 5, 2021

**Short Title:** Protect freedom of association  
and speech at public  
postsecondary campuses

**Attorney Reviewer:** Todd Everts  
Laura Sankey Keip

**Date:** February 10, 2021

### CONFORMITY WITH STATE AND FEDERAL CONSTITUTIONS

*As required pursuant to section 5-11-112(1)(c), MCA, it is the Legislative Services Division's statutory responsibility to conduct "legal review of draft bills". The comments noted below regarding conformity with state and federal constitutions are provided to assist the Legislature in making its own determination as to the constitutionality of the bill. The comments are based on an analysis of jurisdictionally relevant state and federal constitutional law as applied to the bill. The comments are not written for the purpose of influencing whether the bill should become law but are written to provide information relevant to the Legislature's consideration of this bill. The comments are not a formal legal opinion and are not a substitute for the judgment of the judiciary, which has the authority to determine the constitutionality of a law in the context of a specific case.*

*This review is intended to inform the bill draft requestor of potential constitutional conformity issues that may be raised by the bill as drafted. This review IS NOT dispositive of the issue of constitutional conformity and the general rule as repeatedly stated by the Montana Supreme Court is that an enactment of the Legislature is presumed to be constitutional unless it is proven beyond a reasonable doubt that the enactment is unconstitutional. See *Alexander v. Bozeman Motors, Inc.*, 356 Mont. 439, 234 P.3d 880 (2010); *Eklund v. Wheatland County*, 351 Mont. 370, 212 P.3d 297 (2009); *St. v. Pyette*, 337 Mont. 265, 159 P.3d 232 (2007); and *Elliott v. Dept. of Revenue*, 334 Mont. 195, 146 P.3d 741 (2006).*

#### Legal Reviewer Comments:

HB 349, as drafted, may raise potential constitutional concerns associated with Article X, section 9(2)(a), of the Montana Constitution. Section 9(2)(a) provides that “[the] government and control of the Montana university system is vested in a board of regents of higher education which shall have *full power, responsibility, and authority to supervise, coordinate, manage and*

*control the Montana university system and shall supervise and coordinate other public educational institutions assigned by law.” (Emphasis added.)*

According to the Montana Supreme Court, this constitutional provision grants a high degree of independence and autonomy to the Board of Regents, subject only to the Legislature’s power of appropriation. *Board of Regents v. Judge*, 168 Mont. 433 (1975). The Court in *Judge* further noted that “[i]nherent in the constitutional provision granting the Regents their power is the realization that the Board of Regents is the competent body for determining priorities in higher education.” *Id.* at 454. In that case, the Court evaluated several statutory restrictions imposed on the university system, including a provision that limited salary increases for certain university officials. The Court held that this statute “specifically [denied] the Regents the power to function effectively by setting its own personnel policies and determining its own priorities” and held that limitation to be unconstitutional. *Id.*

As drafted, HB 349 prohibits public postsecondary institutions, including the units of the Montana university system, from discriminating against religious, political, and ideological student organizations or denying any benefits or privileges available to other student organizations. Section 2 prohibits a public postsecondary institution from expelling a student for harassment or another similar charge stemming from speech or expression unless the speech or expression is unwelcome and so severe, pervasive and offensive that a student is denied equal access to educational opportunities or other benefits offered by the public postsecondary institution. These provisions in HB 349 may raise potential questions about whether this bill conforms with Article X, section 9(2)(a), of the Montana Constitution.

This legal review note does not address whether the requirements of Amendment I of the U.S. Constitution or Article II, sections 5 through 7, of the Montana Constitution apply to the Board of Regents in the context of specific policies and regulations adopted or not adopted by the Board of Regents. Only a complaint brought against the Board of Regents and before a court of competent jurisdiction with a resulting opinion can make that determination. The potential constitutional conformity issue raised in this legal review note only addresses whether under the Montana Constitution the Legislature can require the Board of Regents and units of the university system to adopt certain policies and regulations and publish required reports.

**Requester Comments:**