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Friday, May 22, 2020

To: Chairwoman Candice Keller
Vice Chairman Craig Riedel
Ranking Member Catherine Ingram
House Higher Education Committee

From: Aaron Baer
President, Citizens for Community Values

Re: Support of SB 40, The Forming Open and Robust University Minds (FORUM) Act

Chairwoman Keller, Vice Chairman Riedel, Ranking Member Ingram and Committee Members:

My name is Aaron Baer and I am the president of Citizens for Community Values, Ohio's Family Policy Council. Our organization is committed to defending First Amendment freedoms, including the freedom of religion, association, and speech.

Unfortunately, one of the greatest places free speech is in danger is on college and university campuses. It's this threat that brings me before you today, and is the reason CCV so strongly supports SB 40, known as the Forming Open and Robust University Minds FORUM Act. This important bill will protect free speech on Ohio's 14 public university campuses, 24 public regional branch campuses, and 23 public community colleges.

Protecting free speech on campus isn't just a position statement of my organization; it is something deeply personal to me as a graduate of Ohio University's E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, class of 2009.

As you may imagine, holding socially conservative views put me in the extreme minority in most, if not all of my classes. On a daily basis, I was challenged to defend my beliefs by professors and my peers. This process helped me better understand my own views, but also have empathy towards those who had a different perspective.

This is the essential university experience, and I will always be a proud Bobcat for it.

Sadly, not every college student in Ohio has been blessed with a similar experience. And in fact, some university officials in Ohio have gone so far as to stifle the First Amendment freedoms of students.

This brings us to the FORUM Act.

Let me first explain this important bill by saying what it is NOT.



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It is not a license to riot, or make violent threats. It's also not a permission slip for students to disrupt classroom activities. Most importantly, the FORUM Act doesn't show favoritism to any one type of speech or message. CCV isn't backing this bill to ensure conservatives or pro-lifers get special treatment on campus – in fact, the core purpose of the bill is to ensure universities are a level playing field for all ideas.

What the FORUM Act does accomplish is simple. The bill:

1. Protects peaceful assemblies, protests, speakers, and displays on campus.
2. Prohibits so-called “Free Speech Zones” on college campuses, which unconstitutionally limit free speech to small segments of public spaces.
3. Prohibits the ability of protestors or opposition to shut down events or other expression via a “Heckler’s Veto.”
4. Requires colleges and universities to have a free speech policy, and report violations of speech on campus to the General Assembly.

At a time when division in our nation is at an all time high, it is essential that our university campuses remain a place where open, honest, and tough discussions can still happen.

The FORUM Act is an aid to Ohio's universities and community colleges as they endeavor to cultivate this environment on their campuses. It sets a clear baseline of the speech protections that must be provided to every student.

This is why countless nonpartisan organizations support this bill that defend First Amendment Freedoms like the Heritage Foundation, the American Legislative Exchange Commission, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, and Alliance Defending Freedom. As you consider this legislation, you will hear from a number of these experts.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Citizens for Community Values (CCV) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that endeavors to create an Ohio where God's blessings of life, family, and religious freedom are treasured, respected, and protected.

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