

Richard Fletcher

Testimony against proposed changes in HB49 substitute budget bill

Senate Finance Committee, Higher Ed Subcommittee Hearing

Thursday May 25, 2017, 9 am

Statehouse South Hearing Room

Dear Subcommittee Chair Gardner,

I am writing as an Associate Professor in the Department of Classics at The Ohio State University to testify about Substitute HB49. I respectfully request that you work to increase State Share of Instruction (SSI) funding and remove the unwarranted, anti-faculty provisions that were added by the bill. I wish to frame my general concerns by offering a pertinent example from my professional experience as engaging students and the public at OSU. My main point is that as teachers and researchers faculty members are already finding creative ways of doing more with less (as my example hope to show) and that the state of Ohio should support our endeavors to educate the citizens of Ohio as a public good and not restrict or hamper us with unnecessary provisions and limits to funding.

Last fall, I was invited by the education department at the Wexner Center for the Arts to create a re-staging of the mythical 'happening' *Theater Piece No. 1* as part of the exhibition *Leap Before You Look: Black Mountain College 1933-1957*. The original 'happening' in August 1952 involved composer John Cage, dancer Merce Cunningham, poets Charles Olson and M.C. Richards and artist Robert Rauschenberg in an eclectic event of which we have several conflicting reports as to what exactly happened. First of all, I wanted to transform this mythical event into an educational experience for my students in two classes that I was teaching - one in the Philosophy Department (PHIL 2450: Philosophical Problems in the Arts) and one in the Art Department (Art 4004/5004: Drawing Ideas) - that each in different ways engaged with the ideas of art, education and community building central to Black Mountain College and its legacy. As a Classicist I am sensitive to the way in which moments and events in the past become frozen into one, canonical version. My main reference point for this, as someone who works on ancient philosophy and its relationship to literary creativity and reception, is Plato and his dialogues. The so-called 'Socratic question' hinges on whether the character we have in Plato's literary dialogues resembles the historical figure of Socrates and to what extent Plato is using his famous teacher as a mouth-piece for his own philosophical ideas (e.g. the immortality of the soul, the Theory of Forms etc)? I knew that Black Mountain College was founded by a Classicist - John Rice - who taught Plato as a means of developing students' sense of the role of dialogue in their education (following John Dewey's philosophy of education). While we read the critical discussion of art and mimesis in Plato's Republic in the Philosophy class, in the Art class *Drawing Ideas* class (that I co-taught with artist and faculty member Suzanne Silver), we made explicit the role of Plato's dialogues in generating creative work by looking at themes of idea, form, mimesis, dialogue and myth in terms of the creative act of drawing. The performance at the Wexner extended these ideas to the history of Black Mountain College and the mythical event of *Theater Piece No. 1*. Amid all of the testimonies as to what happened back in August 1952, I discovered that one had been overlooked in the scholarship: a poem by the participant and faculty member Charles Olson called *A Toss, for John Cage*. In this critical work, Olson attacks the chance operations of Cage that were part of his work and the performance and highlighted the

significance of scriptedness and repetition in the creation of art. To my mind, this was a particularly 'Platonic' approach to the role of dialogue in education as not merely conversation and spontaneous talk, but scripted and organized philosophical back and forth. To somehow bridge Olson's Platonic critique with Cage's Socratic impetus, I asked the students in the Philosophy class to write their names using the words of the poem and then make their own poem of what they came up with. These poems were then used as 'scripts' for the performers at the Wexner in an event called *A Toss, for Theater Piece No. 1*. We paraded through the gallery, clapping out a beat to get people's attention, then stopping in one spot where I would read the original Olson poem. The group of students, other faculty and members of the public (including some children) would then be given 'scripts' and be invited to shout out any words that appeared in their 'scripts' and join in the performance. On shouting out a word, that person would then lead us in specific movement through the gallery as I continued to read the poem. This would then be repeated with another performer reading the poem. By helping generate the ideas and taking part in this performance, OSU students, faculty and members of the public were united in a creative exploration of not only the history of Black Mountain College as an educational institution, but also how the experimental methods of dialogue and performance can be enacted afresh in a contemporary environment and context.

By restricting state support for higher education and limiting my academic freedom as a tenured faculty member, my capacity to conceive and carry out projects such as *A Toss, for Theater Piece No. 1* would be severely hampered. Imposing an unnecessary one-model-fits-all 'post-tenure review' would prevent pedagogical innovation and experimentation among faculty members at the most dynamic and exciting stage of their career. With such a review in place, how could my senior colleagues in the Department of Classics and my divisional Dean in the Arts and Humanities support my project at the Wexner as a valid reflection of my teaching and research as a Classicist if they are mandated to review me in only certain ways and not others? Ohio State, like Ohio's other public colleges and universities, already provides for post-tenure review or some other form of recurrent evaluation of ALL faculty. Institutions already have determined what works for them, and this one-size-fits-all mandate merely will amount to more administrative costs for our already bloated administrations. It will deter qualified faculty from coming to and staying in Ohio when it is more important than ever for our institutions to maintain a competitive edge.

In addition, with the proposed cuts to sick leave, why would a faculty member like myself take the risk of such a physically demanding and energetic activity (I am not a trained dancer!) in a non-traditional classroom setting (an art gallery) without knowing that I was doing so adequately supported by a benefit system that maintained my level of health? Reducing sick leave for university employees (not just faculty) by 33% not only infringes on collective bargaining rights at other institutions, but here at Ohio State it would create a nervous, anxious and overly-cautious community at the university, when we should be teaching students to experiment and explore as part of their educations.

Finally, the provisions calling for each faculty member who assigns textbooks to file an annual financial disclosure form is offensive, limiting and a solution in search of a problem. As the use of the Charles Olson poem as a generative source of creative texts for students in my classes that were key to the performance shows, we can see how successful teaching employs oral and performative elements that textbooks alone cannot accomplish. This lesson was understood by Plato, who wrote dynamic dialogues of his master Socrates' conversations rather than dogmatic 'how to' tracts. We faculty assign texts with which they are most familiar, that suit

their teaching styles, and that they believe best will help students learn. We faculty do not assign textbooks because of personal benefit or on account of influence from textbook companies - in many ways we try to stave off these companies encroaching onto our terrain as 'live' educators.

In short, a project like *A Toss, for Theater Piece No. 1* would be almost impossible to accomplish with the restrictions on faculty proposed by the HB49. At the same time, if the SSI were to be increased, there would be a direct line between projects like this developed by faculty, the students involved and the public that comprised their audience. Visitors to the Wexner on the day of our performance were witnessing the culmination of an intensely creative dialogue between a faculty member and his students, between a Classicist and Contemporary Art, between the history of experimental higher education in the US and its current manifestation. Just think what it would have meant to that very audience to know that this kind of initiative was deemed a public good by the State? Increasing the SSI would make visible the commitment to public education to the broader community in the State and would energize and empower innovation in both research, teaching and learning in the widest possible sense.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Fletcher

Associate Professor

Department of Classics

The Ohio State University

fletcher.161@osu.edu