

Testimony of Krista Sigler, PhD
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
May 16, 2023

Chair Young, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Dr. Krista Sigler and I am an associate professor of History at the University of Cincinnati where I have taught full-time since 2009. I do not represent the University of Cincinnati, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute House Bill 151.

Last week, while I worked in my house, someone hit my parked car. I was working, actively researching the latest job trends for my students, and suddenly I was pulled off that important work to deal with random damages inflicted upon me. I feel much the same way now; I have been working in good faith attempting to help my students and now I have to spend energy and anxiety addressing a broadside from outside my university community.

What I see before us is a bill that was created from politicized assumptions about education, created without practical input or research into the realities of universities, and fear. I ask the committee members to please stop this bill. Instead of randomly attacking universities within Ohio, please take a moment to at least have a dialogue with your university faculty and staff about real concerns in today's universities.

The concerns I see in this bill reflect the very politicization that the bill supposedly means to oppose. The bill includes a general hostility to collective bargaining, including prohibitions on strikes, limitations on what can be the subject of bargaining, and policies of post-tenure review with language about "allowable expression." There are many reasons these points are problematic and/or unnecessary. In Ohio, we voted against many of these concepts when the state spoke loudly against SB5 (2011). As a member of a public university, working in one of the lower paid colleges, I can tell you as well that one of the few draws we have for new faculty is the protection of a viable union. Without these protections, with this kind of state interference, I can guarantee a decline in faculty quality. What's more, the post-tenure review process as outlined, including the ability to remove a faculty member for language outside the "allowable expression," is frankly a path to the road to ridiculousness we see right now in Florida, where Jenna Barbee, an elementary school teacher, is currently being investigated for supposed "indoctrination" because she showed an animated Disney movie in class after students finished their state exams.

This is all absurd and makes a sad joke of education. What's more, it is entirely unnecessary. Please note that we, the universities, do actually have pathways for students to complain if they feel a professor has gone beyond the boundaries of appropriate behavior or language. (Want evidence? Feel free to walk around my college's hallways and you will see signage everywhere inviting anyone to submit a comment about their experience. Our accreditation

requires this kind of openness to public comment.) In addition, in regards faculty expression, in my own union contract with the AAUP of the University of Cincinnati, there is discussion of what academic freedom means and what it does not, and it explains pathways to address faculty issues. We do not need a state-mandated additional superstructure of laws and bureaucracy to address this. Our universities already have these mechanisms.

I also want to speak to the mandates about student evaluations, especially that they should be 50% of a faculty member's annual review. This is another point where, if there had been a dialogue with the universities, we would not be here. We already consult students' evaluations of faculty when addressing faculty members' performance. We do not weigh them as a percentage because student evaluations are notorious for reflecting bias, both direct and indirect. I can testify to this; my own evaluations, while positive, have included a series of comments praising my hair, my purse, and my shoes. I suspect all sensible people would agree that no one's job should rest on these things—and yet, based on House Bill 151, mine would. And that's the positive. As someone who reads student evaluations for other faculty, I can tell you students frequently include comments equally as inappropriate and negative about their instructors.

Once again, the universities already have a means of assessing instruction and continued improvement in this field. We do already review student evaluations. We do not lock ourselves into a percentage weight because people working in education know that student evaluations reflect as much, if not more, about the students as they do about the faculty.

The bill also mandates the posting of syllabi with professional credentials. This is micromanagement and a waste of Ohio's resources. If we look at any of the syllabi of full-time faculty in my unit, for example, we will see they unanimously indicate they are PhDs. That's typical. Why do we need legislation to mandate this? Furthermore, posting syllabi online is an exercise in wasted human resource hours. If students want a syllabus early, they have every opportunity to ask their faculty member. Why does this requirement need to be there? Why can't the workers of our university spend their time doing productive work that advances students' education, vs. wasting hours uploading syllabi to the public for no clear reason?

Finally, the bill attempts to order the creation of workload policies to define a full-time faculty member's work in terms of credit hours. This is a reflection of not actually investigating how universities work. Colleges already have workload policies stipulating the nature of the faculty member's work. All this mandate does is require the bureaucracy and governance system of each university to waste time attempting to convert extant workload policies into the language of the bill, and for no clear reason whatsoever.

I could go on, but I hope this is enough to convince you to reject this bill. I am sure all the state's universities would welcome dialogue with the legislature about actual problems in education, like student mental health, which is in a state of national crisis. We could be spending our time, money, and resources on that, instead of defending ourselves against bills that were clearly written from fears based on political ideology and misinformation. In addition, the level of micromanagement here and the heavy hand about faculty language reminds me sickeningly of when I did dissertation research in Russia and archivists made

clear to me that certain topics were off-limits. This kind of politicized interference in education is an extremely poor step to take in a country dedicated to freedom.

Just as I mentioned before with my car accident, right now I am stressed, anxious, and spending valuable time simply defending my day-to-day life rather than working for the good of my students. Members of the Committee, you can change that; unlike with my car, this situation is not an accident, and you can stop it before further damage happens.

I therefore respectfully ask that you reject this bill and if your members are worried about specific issues in education, to have a thoughtful investigation and discussion with the educational community. We all want the best for our students; let's put them, not politics and fear, first.

I thank you for your time,

Krista Sigler, PhD