

Testimony of Joseph Baumgartner, PhD
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
May 15th, 2023

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

My name is Joseph Baumgartner, and I am a professor of biology at the University of Cincinnati Blue Ash College, where I have taught for five years. I do not represent UC Blue Ash, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute House Bill 151.

HB151 has been named the “Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act,” yet virtually every provision in the bill is unhelpful to education, and most are actively harmful. The sheer amount of redundant, contradictory, and meddling policies conveys the message that the sponsors and supporters of this bill are deeply unserious about actually enhancing education. It is difficult to catalog all the failings of this bill in a single testimony, so I will outline what I found to be the most egregious issues below.

First, the weakening of protections afforded to the academic workforce is a direct attack on education. HB151 would disallow faculty and staff from striking and institute a post-tenure review policy. These abhorrent policies have no place in a free society. Any worker has the right to protest unjust labor practices and enjoy security in their employment. A common truism in education is “faculty working conditions are student learning conditions.” By introducing insecurity to the faculty and staff responsible for educating students, HB151 only harms learning in Ohio. Also, weighing institutions down with excessive red tape does not help students in the classroom. Many schools already include an annual review process, some more stringent than what HB151 proposes. Every institution of higher education that I am aware of has student evaluations of their courses. It is not necessary to include state officials in these matters. Further, the new additions to HB151 that strip bargaining rights from academic workers is a wholesale attack on Ohio workers.

Second, the idea of promoting intellectual diversity while restricting options for students and faculty is nothing more than disingenuous doublespeak. HB151 and its sponsors seem to want it both ways. There’s language for “freedom of expression” and “free inquiry,” all of which sound good on paper (and are currently in practice in literally every institution I have had experience with). However, the freedom of expression and inquiry that this bill champions is limited and guided by the whims of conservative culture wars. In case there is confusion about what free inquiry looks like, allow me to offer a couple of points of clarification. Free inquiry *is not* a state-mandated, unaccredited curriculum with a list of readings decided by politicians instead of educational professionals. Free inquiry *is not* forbidding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training in attempt to combat “woke” or whatever the moral panic of the day is. Free inquiry *is not* labeling settled scientific issues

such as climate change as “controversial” based off the whims of politicians, pundits, or their donors. Universities are already practicing what HB151 preaches, and these senseless restrictions in our education are a hindrance to our academic freedom.

In summary, nothing in HB151 enhances higher education in Ohio. Nothing in HB151 enhances student understanding of the course content. Nothing in HB151 enhances student success by removing barriers. Nothing in HB151 enhances schools to meet and maintain accreditation criteria. Nothing in HB151 enhances universities to make them safer in any capacity. Nothing in HB151 enhances the experience of the campus community. Nothing in HB151 enhances the competitive edge our young adults will need to be successful. If HB151 is your definition of enhancement, then I strongly insist that you listen to your constituents for whom higher education is more than a buzzword.