

Testimony of Elizabeth M. Smith-Pryor, J.D., Ph.D.  
Before the House Higher Education Committee  
Representative Tom Young, Chair

May 17, 2023

Chair Young, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the House Higher Education Committee: My name is Elizabeth Smith-Pryor, and I am a professor of History at Kent State University where I have taught since the fall of 2001. I do not represent Kent State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to House Bill 151.

I am a professor of African American History and American Women's History at Kent State University and have been a proud citizen of Ohio for almost 22 years. I have raised two children in Ohio. I own my own home and diligently pay my state and local taxes. Up until now, my intent has been to stay in Ohio even after I retire so I can continue to contribute in whatever ways I am capable to the people of this state. Unfortunately, recent proposed legislation in Ohio including House Bill 151 leads me to reconsider my plans to remain in Ohio for the rest of my life. I am deeply concerned about House Bill 151 and the unprecedented political interference and micromanagement that it would inflict on Ohio's public colleges and universities, Ohio's public college students, and the citizens of Ohio. I ask that you do not support this legislation.

First, I am deeply concerned by this bill's attack on workers' rights by banning the right to strike. Faculty should have the right to strike since we do have every right to advocate for fair working conditions, which are the students' learning conditions. In addition, House Bill 151 would increase by legislative fiat the workload of Kent State University's full time tenured and tenure track faculty on 9-month appointments.

Second, given my areas of scholarly and pedagogical expertise, I am deeply concerned that while House Bill 151 claims to promote "intellectual diversity," the proposed bill prohibits a university from opposing systematic racism, sexism and/or discrimination based on LGBTQ+ status. While the legislation seemingly would not prohibit faculty teaching about these topics, I am convinced the impact of the legislation will be to water down the content of many history courses and thereby undermine college students' education. It is impossible to teach any aspect of African American history or American women's history honestly and fairly without being concerned that someone might complain about the course especially given the proposed bill's requirement of public posting of syllabi. This bill as written poses a chilling effect on academic freedom that will lead to the exact opposite of what House Bill 151's proponents claim motivates them--promoting open intellectual inquiry. Classrooms where instructors are afraid to teach and students are afraid to learn will only generate negative educational outcomes. House Bill 151, if passed, will only have a dire impact on the ability of Ohio's college graduates to compete in a national and global market.

I am extremely concerned by the bill's requirements that relate to course syllabi especially the demand syllabi be made accessible online to the public. I have seen no explanation behind the requirement for doing so and fail to see any connection with the claim of promoting open intellectual inquiry. Instead, I am worried that the public posting of syllabi will lead to online harassment of instructors. I am surprised the state legislature would open up hardworking teachers to the possibility of receiving threatening and harassing emails. For the past two decades, I have been deeply committed to providing the highest quality education in all my undergraduate and graduate courses. Unfortunately, if this bill passes, and given the topics I teach, if I find myself subject to online harassment and trolling, I will have to reconsider whether I can afford to teach and live in a hostile environment.

Respectfully, I ask that you reject this bill, which will only lead to real, irreversible damage to Ohio's higher education with a long-term impact on the state's ability to economically compete with states that don't undermine the integrity of valuable public goods like public colleges and universities.