

Testimony of Jennifer Suchland, Ph.D.
In Opposition to HB 151
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee

May 15, 2023

Dear Members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is Jennifer Suchland. I am a Columbus resident, a teacher, and a life-long learner. My research expertise is in Russian politics and society. I am very familiar with the insidious practices of authoritarian governments. After two decades of study, I also am alert to the vulnerability of democracy — indeed, democracy remains one of the most radical and vulnerable ideas in the world.

I am shocked and alarmed by House Bill 151, the Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act. This proposed legislation is counter to a pluralist society and is designed to under-educate and perhaps mis-educate students in the vital skill of discussing different opinions. A functioning democracy requires the important work of reasoned debate. And yet, HB 151 seeks to suppress discussion and learning about the very topics that create social fissures. The health of our democracy requires that we lean into the “controversial topics” (lines 183-187) that divide us. Indeed, isn’t the skill of reasoned and open discussion central to your work, as representatives? How will future generations face any social challenge without this necessary skill?

One of the “controversial topics” targeted in the bill is diversity. Yet the word is used in at least two different ways. On one hand, the bill champions “intellectual diversity” (defined 188) and even requires university resources to create a rubric of evaluation (line 220) and an annual monitoring mechanism (304). On the other hand, it presents “diversity” as something to repress: a “controversial belief” (186), or a banned “specified concept” (193-95). How can there be intellectual diversity if there is no discussion of the very beliefs in which we have divergent views? This does not make sense. The inherent contradiction of the “intellectual diversity” and “controversial topics” provisions are red flags of authoritarianism. Government is not the arbiter of diversity — who and what counts as diversity. Diversity is reality and this bill aims to control it like Lukashenko in Belarus, Putin in Russia, or Orban in Hungary.

It is not possible to legislate away diversity, but we can create the conditions for mutual respect and in turn find shared values. Higher education is central to building those conditions. As an undergraduate student at a small Christian liberal arts college, my worldview expanded through awareness of diversity – national, ethnic and racial diversity, gender diversity, linguistic diversity, cultural diversity, spiritual diversity. If I had been at a university where HB 151 was doctrine, my transformative experience would not have been possible. I suspect I would be less compassionate, less humble, and certainly less educated.

HB 151 is not an enhancement of higher education, rather an erosion. Is there an opposite to diversity, I ask you? The controlling and silencing of diversity leads to death. I share three books I read as an undergraduate student illustrate what I mean:

-Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* teaches where there is an attempt to eliminate diversity of thought, there is totalitarianism.

-Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Famine* teaches where there is monoculture agriculture and the elimination of seed diversity, there is famine.

-Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* teaches where there is an attempt to eliminate diversity of people, there is fascism.

Legislative mandates and bans will never un-diversify society but they can undermine the very social mechanisms we have to understand, protect, and respect diversity. Please choose life and vote NO on HB 151. Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony.