

Opponent Testimony for H.B. 151 Jacob Risinger, Ph.D.  
Ohio House of Representatives, Higher Education Committee  
Tom Young, Chair  
May 17, 2023

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

My name is Jacob Risinger and I am a professor of English at the Ohio State University, where I have taught for nine years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to House Bill 151.

I'm grateful for your attention today, and especially to Representative Demetriou and Representative Williams for fostering public conversation about higher education in Ohio.

One of the most inspiring things about teaching at Ohio State is walking across the Oval, which ties the various corners of our far-flung campus together. So I thought I'd start by evoking some of things I've seen on the Oval recently. In March, students were busy campaigning for positions in student government, an election process that is also open to initiative petitions and referenda from students. Sororities and Fraternities elicit support for charitable causes of their own choosing. Every now and again, you hear a Bagpiper, and on many weekdays, you can take a quiz and learn about the Bible. Last Friday, two Mormon missionaries invited me to church. Students advocate for a range of views, including pro-life and pro-choice perspectives. Last week a group of students from the College of Food, Agriculture, and Environmental Science were showing passing students how to milk a cow. In 2016, a student group rolled a twelve-foot beach ball around the Oval to drum-up support for free speech. In November, students in the Reserve Officer Training Corps ran the flag around the perimeter of the Oval for hours. A few weeks ago, a Boy Scout Troop was marveling at the GrubHub robots that deliver food across campus.

What you see on the Oval is just a glimpse of the intellectual community and diversity that is alive and well in classrooms across campus. Before advancing this bill, please come see it in action.

At Ohio State, one of the core principles from our statement of "Vision, Mission, and Values" is simply that faculty and staff will encourage "open-minded exploration, risk-taking, and freedom of expression." Thinking of all my colleagues, we do this work of teaching not because we want to tell students *what* to think, but because we want to teach them *how* to think.

I know this principle is one that many on the committee share, so I'll just highlight two ways in which I worry HB 151 might hinder this work.

For one thing, I believe that a publicly accessible syllabus bank, searchable by keywords, will not accurately capture the true intellectual diversity on offer in our courses. A syllabus is often a few pages; in a three-credit course, we spend at least forty hours thinking together—and this conversational space is one key site in which intellectual exchange actually happens. The syllabus is a poor stand-in for the thinking together and helpful cross examination that happens in any class. Creating a space in which the public is encouraged to monitor what goes on in classrooms based only on syllabi would be like asking viewers to judge films only by their trailers.

I feel similarly about “intellectual diversity rubrics” (see line 22) as an aspect of student evaluations. Say an instructor undertakes the hard work of teaching somehow how to think: that instructor won’t want their students to feel guilt or anguish—see line 674—but good teachers know that “discomfort” is often necessary for growth. What if a student mistakes the productive “discomfort” that comes from good questions for a kind of dismissal? That abstract score—central to the promotion and retention of faculty—would send the wrong idea, for sometimes the best teachers are the ones who create for their students spaces in which they can experience discomfort.

When I joined the faculty at Ohio State in 2014, I could not have been prouder, for I remembered the storied historian Tony Judt, who once described land-grant universities like Ohio State as “the best thing about America”—as “internationally renowned institutions [that] have no peers outside the US.” Let’s protect the world class institutions of higher education we have in Ohio. Let’s not try to fix a problem we don’t have.