



May 17, 2023 | Testimony in opposition to HB151 | House Higher Education Committee

Chair Young, Ranking Member Miller and members of the House Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to HB 151, a bill that would harm higher education institutions and make them less welcoming and tolerant places for people from marginalized communities.

Equality Ohio is a statewide education and advocacy organization dedicated to pursuing lived and legal equality for LGBTQ+ Ohioans. As advocates for LGBTQ+ people and their families, we work to ensure that our community's freedoms are protected, and that includes the freedom to get an education in a safe and tolerant learning environment, the freedom to organize, and the freedom to openly discuss our own lives and identities without being subjected to government censorship or even professional discipline.

Similarly to last year's Don't Say Gay Don't Mention Race bills, this proposed bill is expansive in the worst way. It proposes vague bans that would upend educators' ability to have honest conversations in classrooms, and by extension greatly increase the risk that professors could be targeted or even reprimanded for teaching honest history.

This bill conflates mutual understanding and respect and indoctrination. Training staff to respect other cultures? Indoctrination. Training employees not to sexually harass their peers or students? Indoctrination. Declaring historical events like the holocaust, or brutal discriminatory policies like slavery, are bad? Indoctrination. Shared values such as kindness, generosity, and respect for others are (hopefully) universal. Yet under this proposal, due to its broad prohibitions, arguing against brutality, discrimination, or even just declaring that slavery is bad, could open the door to an accusation of wrongdoing.

This bill includes a prohibition on institutions or instructors taking any position on a "Controversial belief or policy," a term defined exceedingly broadly as "any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy." It's hard to conjure an example of a topic or belief, no matter how vanilla, that hasn't been the subject of political controversy. And who defines controversy? I don't believe someone marrying a member of the same sex is controversial, for example, but marriage equality has continually been the subject of political controversy thanks to a small group of people that have made it their mission to ban LGBTQ+ identities. Pronouns, a part of speech that have been around as long as the English language itself, are hardly controversial in their definition or history. Yet, the topic of pronouns has become a manufactured scandal and for some inexplicable reason, the mere mention of everyday pronouns will now make a small group of people absolutely lose their minds. *Any* topic can and has become the



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subject of political controversy, regardless of whether it's rational or reasonable to everyone.

HB 151 effectively creates a carte blanche to punish college instructors for expressing free thought or demanding basic standards of decency. This bill opens the floodgates to our state legislature dabbling in altogether thought policing. While it has been rationalized as a way to ensure an inclusive intellectual environment for all perspectives, this bill would do exactly the opposite. Professors could be regularly reprimanded or even lose their jobs simply for expressing perspectives based in logic and expertise.

Colleges are institutions that are designed for innovative, creative thinking, and prohibiting thought leaders from sharing their thoughts hardly seems productive. This bill is so expansive that it would dramatically chill speech and extracurricular activities on campus, and substantially harm the college experience for students and administrators alike. It's very hard to overstate the broad prohibitions and the potential harm to state institutions of higher education if this were to become law.

This bill also serves as an onerous attack on workers' rights for public employees by entirely prohibiting employees from striking, and includes other unnecessary restrictions on instruction. This bill would not protect families, students, or staff, and instead would be bad for the economy, bad for freedom of speech, expression, and association.

Please vote no on HB 151 and I am happy to answer any questions. Thank you.

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