

Testimony of Mary M. Step, PhD

Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
November 13, 2023

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is Dr. Mary Step, and I am a professor of Public Health at Kent State University, where I have taught and conducted research for eight years. Prior to this I was a member of the Case Western Reserve faculty in both the School of Medicine and College of Arts and Sciences. I received all three of my academic degrees from public universities in Ohio (CSU, KSU). As such, I am truly a homegrown academic and made a deliberate choice to continue my working life in Ohio. I do not represent any of these great universities in an official capacity, but **I am submitting my testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.**

When I entered academia it was more as a calling than a choice. Though my parents taught me to tell the truth, events during my youth showed me subterfuge and obfuscation at every level of our structural institutions including governments, religion, media, and the military. Consequently I became committed to the idea of academic freedom as the unhindered pursuit of truth. To me, academic freedom means that as an American citizen and tenured academic, I am free to pursue my own curiosity, test theoretical explanations, and consider different systems of thinking. Free thought and spiritual fulfillment are the most fundamental of our freedoms, with no government or private employer using their legal or economic power to restrict that thinking within the confines of moral and humanitarian purpose. I believe the freedom to pursue scientific truths is the apex of human development and responsibility. I fully understand the difference between a fact and an opinion as every scientist must. The free pursuit of scientific facts and creative endeavors is the substance of civic stability, economic advancement, and human achievement. Consequently, those freedoms are vigorously protected within a system of rigorous disciplinary evaluation that clearly understands the necessary competencies of their membership.

However, for multiple reasons, academic freedom has often been portrayed as a one-sided ideologic crusade that threatens a deeply suspicious state or vulnerable students. Though there have been highly publicized cases of misconduct, the vast majority of academics work incredibly hard to prove their competence and earn their place in the academy. Academic freedom, as codified in tenure, retrenchment, faculty governance, and bargaining rights is the cornerstone of all ideologic freedom, which I believe this bill aims to protect. Academic work is a life-long commitment to a three-part system: teaching, research and service. I cannot imagine any other private industry or public service setting competency goals in the same way as the tenure system. Maybe they should. Our system is not broken and no valid evidence has been provided that it is.

I ask that the State of Ohio trust the professors in its higher education system. Faculty governance of single university procedures and policies should be enacted by those who live them everyday. This must be protected by continued bargaining rights, disciplinary tenure review, and full academic freedom and support for those who demonstrate the highest competencies of their field.

Respectfully,

Dr. Mary M. Step

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