

Hello,

I am a lifelong Ohioan and a current student of Case Western Reserve University. I take specific issue with this 2024 Senate Bill 297 due to how it will impact the state of speech and debate on my campus.

At CWRU, we have been experiencing more than a year now of ongoing discontent and protest. This turmoil has had to do with the university's association with and involvement in the historical and current political conflict between Palestine and Israel. The initial flash point of this was a reaction by our university administration to a proposal on divestment -- one brought forward by our student body and accepted by our student government. As a matter of literal fact, this proposal did not at any point allude to Judaism or the Jewish people, only speaking in terms of the sovereign state of Israel; however our administration responded by calling all promoting groups antisemitic and the language to be dangerous. Since then, the administration has been taking quick and heavy-handed punitive action against many of the groups protesting. I cannot speak to whether or not these actions are themselves legally justifiable, but they do appear to a departure from all university reactions to previous protest initiatives, and my experience is that they have put a chilling effect on discourse on this wider social and political subject throughout my campus.

I am entirely positive that this bill, in deferring to the IHRA definition of antisemitism, will only further degrade our campus speech environment. I can see that the IHRA definition may have utility in a historical or anthropological sense. However, the broad association it itself provides between Judaism and the state of Israel throughout its own self-interpretation make me unsure of how it will be effectively applied to the legal realm. That this definition is itself prefaced as "not legally binding" by the IHRA is similarly disconcerting. Further, though I appreciate the inclusion in this Senate Bill that it will not serve to violate our Free Speech Rights, I fail to see how such vague associations as are in the IHRA definition will not confuse the legal process and chill speech as a result of possible judicial blackmail, SLAPPS and the like. Though we at CWRU are a private university, we are still bound by government support and grants; the fact that this legislation specifically notes its applicability to universities is therefore extremely concerning, especially in light of the current climate at CWRU.

Our university has been taking sweeping action against many of my fellow students, often in ways unclear to the students themselves and to the wider campus community. All of it has been tied in some way to the current Israel-Palestine conflict and generally justified as a prevention of antisemitism. At this very moment, we are seeing the administration create, promote, and expand the powers of a Committee on Freedom of Expression -- I hope that Orwellian name is not lost on you all. I can only see this proposed bill as a further tool our university will use to continue cracking down on student discourse on our campus. I have seen firsthand that these actions by our university are only making discourse on the topic of American support to the state of Israel -- and the discussions on antisemitism that often follow -- more polarized and contested. As such I believe that the acceptance of this vague IHRA definition will not be effective in promoting the goals of the underlying civil rights law.

I thank you all for your continued attention to preserving decency and equality in Ohio, but in order to ensure that we do move in a positive direction I must ask that you reject this current bill and pursue legislation that is more precise and effective on this topic.

- Ian Dyke