

Testimony of Jennifer M. Taber, Ph.D.
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
May 13, 2023

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

My name is Jennifer Taber, and I am an associate professor of Psychological Sciences at Kent State University, where I have worked for over 7 years. I do not represent Kent State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute House Bill 151.

I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, where I lived until I moved to attend college and to complete my graduate education and postdoctoral training. I returned to Ohio to begin my position at Kent State University in 2016. I care deeply about the well-being of Ohioans and the quality of higher education in this state. I believe HB-151 will have a strong negative impact on both the well-being of Ohioans and the quality of higher education in Ohio. Thus, I am strongly opposed to HB-151. Below, I articulate just some of my concerns about this bill.

I recognize and understand the desire for free speech and for all college students to have a strong sense of belonging and inclusion on college campuses and to have the ability to express their beliefs without fear of negative consequences. I share these values. I do not believe HB-151 will accomplish this goal. Instead, I believe it will have the opposite effect. It will hinder free speech and lead many people to feel that they do not belong on and cannot speak freely on college campuses and in college classrooms.

Union membership is one of the many—and one of the most important—positive aspects of working at Kent State University. As such, faculty members' ability to strike during negotiations is an important tool to ensure appropriate compensation and working conditions. The positive working environment of faculty who are teaching college classes has a direct positive impact on the students who take these classes. Faculty who are appropriately compensated and who have appropriate workload have greater bandwidth and ability to serve the students in their classes, to put effort into their teaching, and to approach students with the individualized attention they deserve. Many faculty are already overburdened with their commitments to teaching, research, and service, and spend many more hours than a 40-hour workweek dedicated to their students and to advancing knowledge through research. Increasing workload would lead to a dramatic decline in the quality of classroom instruction in higher education. It would decrease the ability of faculty to mentor undergraduate students through research experiences and classroom assignments that would make them competitive candidates for future jobs and for admission to graduate school. To give a classroom example, faculty with increased workload (and less time) would be more likely to resort to easy-to-grade assignments such as multiple-choice tests that are less likely to teach students critical thinking or writing skills, and will have less time to provide personalized feedback on writing assignments and projects. The changes proposed in HB-151 that pertain to striking and workload will negatively impact college students and the quality of education they receive in their classrooms.

The goal of DEI efforts is to ensure that college campuses are safe places for all students. It is absolutely critical that these efforts be allowed to continue without external interference. I believe that hampering DEI efforts will have financial and economic consequences for the state of Ohio, as it will disincentivize potential faculty and students to move to (or stay in) Ohio, and it will motivate many existing faculty and students to leave Ohio. Thus, I believe this bill will have negative financial and educational consequences for the state of Ohio.

I urge the committee to seriously consider whether this bill will accomplish what it is intended to, and how undermining the efforts of higher education faculty—people who overwhelmingly are deeply devoted to educating and caring for those who seek higher education—will impact the quality of education in Ohio. I do not know of any colleagues that are in favor of this bill. I believe that change and collaboration can occur through discussion and listening. I see no evidence that this bill has been informed by truly listening to Ohioans or to those who spend day-in and day-out in higher education. I do not believe that HB-151 is the right way to address the concerns underlying the creation of this bill, and I believe it will have many negative and unintended consequences.