

Testimony of Gregory Wilson, 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 Gregory Wilson, and I am a professor of history at the University of Akron, where I have taught for over 20 years. I do not represent the University of Akron, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in continued opposition to SB 83 and substitute House Bill 151. The new House Bill 151 reflects changes made by the Senate, but it remains wrong for our students, our faculty, and our state.

I will limit my testimony to two areas. In terms of ideas and education, the bill is internally contradictory, and attempts to micromanage the affairs of faculty, staff, students, and universities inconsistent with self-government and intellectual freedom – two hallmarks of American ideals. In effect, the bill charges the state government with the power of ideological surveillance, less like democracy and more like authoritarian states devoid of freedom.

The bill claims to support educating students by means of “free, open, and rigorous intellectual inquiry to seek the truth.” Of course, that’s what any good classroom does. The bill argues that students are to develop “the intellectual skills they need to reach their own, informed conclusions.” Again, that’s what classrooms are and should be doing. College and universities rightly should be “committed to create a community dedicated to an ethic of civil and free inquiry” and are institutions that respect “the autonomy of each member,” support “individual capacities for growth,” and tolerate “differences in opinion that naturally occur in a public higher education community.” I agree that universities must provide “equality of opportunity” for all faculty, students, and staff and should ensure “the fullest degree of intellectual diversity.”

Yet this bill prevents these very things. In trying to define limits on discussion, the bill uses vague terms such as “controversial policy” “specified concept” and “specified ideology.” As a professor of history, I can tell you that virtually all topics are controversial. The bill fails to offer a definition of a specified concept, but only a limited set of terms. The same fatal flaws befall attempts at defining specified ideologies. In essence, all of these are efforts to stop discussion of some concepts and not others. This violates the internal goals of the bill, as they prohibit speech, disrespect the autonomy of individuals, limit the free, open, and rigorous intellectual inquiry to seek the truth, and shut down the ability to create a community dedicated to an ethic of civil and free inquiry. These also happen to be the hallmarks of a healthy democracy.

In terms of mandates on faculty employment, the bill exhibits government overreach as well. The bill denies workers their democratic rights to advocate for working conditions. This is not a bill to protect student learning, but a bill to destroy the voices of faculty, staff, and other campus employees. Further, this legislation destroys tenure. Tenure serves multiple purposes. It protects academic freedom, the very foundation of our universities and colleges that make them the envy of the world. If we are to maintain excellence in our Ohio institutions of higher education, then faculty need the freedom to pursue their ideas, and tenure ensures just that, to be free of the fear of offending or challenging standard ways of thinking to allow our knowledge of the world to move forward. Furthermore, tenure ensures faculty governance of higher education, bringing experienced educators into the decision-making process that has maintained a world-class education for our students. Undermining tenure can jeopardize accreditation, destroying the reputation of professional programs and degrees generally, which will, in turn, decrease enrollments and threaten the prestige of Ohio's educational system.

Ohio is already suffering from flat population growth, declining enrollments, and a "brain drain" of our most talented students and researchers choosing to live and work elsewhere. Why make this worse? Given the deeply problematic aspects of this bill, I urge you to reject this legislation. Thank you for accepting my testimony.