

Brian Hall

Testimony: Senate Bill 1

March 11, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Brian Hall, and even though I am a proud member of the English faculty at Cuyahoga Community College, I am here representing myself and am speaking in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

When the bill was in the Senate, my opposition testimony focused on how this bill would limit classroom discussion because the definitions of controversial beliefs and intellectual diversity are ambiguous. Even Senator Cirino stated that the definitions are vague. When answering a question from Representative Miller, Senator Cirino said, “When we talk about controversial topics, it’s not meant to be exhaustive because controversial topics will change over time. There will be controversial things two years from now that you and I don’t anticipate at this time.”

If controversial topics can change, who determines what is or isn’t controversial? As someone who teaches argument and persuasion, how would I ensure that my topic hasn’t become controversial? Who becomes the arbiter of controversial topics so I know how to navigate my classroom in a way that wouldn’t cause students to feel discomfort?

Additionally, when teaching argumentative writing, we learn critical thinking strategies, which include how to effectively evaluate sources. But this will be difficult because this bill requires that each student reaches their own decision. Whether he knew it or not, Senator Cirino highlighted this issue, especially in a class that focuses on how to create an argument. He said, “Diversity of thought is having an environment where professors are willing to entertain even sometimes crazy ideas...crazy ideas is [sic] part of free speech. We have the right to have bad ideas. Dumb ideas in some cases.”

This bill takes away my ability to teach students how to strengthen those ideas, how to make them better because I will be afraid that I will be reported or be given a negative evaluation if a student misunderstands or misrepresents what I am doing in the class, which is guiding them to achieve the course’s outcome. A student can say that I have interfered with their intellectual diversity.

What this bill is creating is an environment where every idea is equal. Every argument is rhetorically the same. And it takes away my ability to teach and the students’ opportunity to learn how to develop stronger critical thinking skills that these students will need throughout their college life and their professional careers.

Finally, this bill is not interested in academic rigor. In the name of “intellectual diversity,” the bill wants students to be free to speak their minds on any topic in class and for professors, who are experts in their field, to tell students, regardless of the accuracy of the students’ statements, “Great job!”

This is not education. This will not get us, to use Senator Cirino’s words again, “to the top of the heap” in higher education. It is cheapening education to the point that it would be more apt to give students a participation trophy when they graduate rather than a degree.

I ask you to please consider this testimony and vote no on this bill.

Thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.