

Testimony of Randolph Roth, College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of History and Sociology, Ohio State University

Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
March 11, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Randy Roth, and I am a Professor of History and Sociology at Ohio State, where I have been proud to teach for past forty years. As a faculty member, I cannot speak on behalf of Ohio State, but I would like to testify as a private citizen.

How Do We Teach at Ohio State?

I had hoped, as someone who has taught at Ohio State for forty years and bleeds Scarlet and Gray, that we would be spared the attacks on higher education that have broken out across the nation. I had hoped that the accomplishments of our students and alumni, their ability to think critically, independently, and creatively, and their contributions to the prosperity and well-being of Ohio and our nation, would speak for themselves. Sadly, they have not.

The last thing we as faculty wish to do is indoctrinate our students, because the purpose of higher education is to give our students the tools they'll need to build a better world than the one we've created, to solve problems that we've failed to solve, and to solve problems we can't even see. Our nation's universities are the greatest in the world because they do not shackle our students to the past, to the current state of knowledge, or to a particular ideology. We help our students find their own way, as best we can.

For example, our faculty in American history created a reader to help our students learn how to think critically, one that we also hoped would appeal to our students' wonderful, ironic, self-deprecating, Midwestern sense of humor. Every module begins with a debate among historians. Was the American Revolution conservative or radical? Did the political system break down in the 1850s because of disagreements over slavery, or because of nativist hostility toward the sudden influx of Catholic immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and French Canada? Did the Salem witchcraft trials target women who were considered too assertive or independent for the times, or because the accused had ties to Quakerism, or because the accused lived in or near Salem's prospering port, which rural residents resented?

Each debate among historians is followed by sources from the past—sermons, trial transcripts, diaries, legislation—so students can see the evidence and draw their own conclusions. We ask our students to weigh the evidence and develop their own interpretations. Our only requirement is that they build the strongest case they can for the positions they disagree with before they try to prove that the evidence for their interpretations is stronger.

When we teach about subjects like the American Revolution, we teach that we Americans have *all* been here from the beginning. We don't teach about "the" Revolution, but about the four revolutions—conservative, libertarian, reformist, and radical. All four of our major political philosophies today have their roots in the Revolution. Our Revolution isn't the property of a particular political party or point of view—it belongs to all of us. The same is true when we teach our students about our many, many religious traditions, which we discuss in detail in every course in American history. We don't have a single religious tradition—not even a single Christian tradition. We have many traditions, all of which have played an important role in making America what it is today. People of faith have always disagreed over the major issues of the day, just as they do today. And our nation has been strongest when people of different faiths have come together in a common cause. We need look no further, once again, than to the Revolution. The most fervent supporters of the Revolution were egalitarian evangelicals—Baptists and Methodists. But the leadership was heavily populated by deists, who looked to science, social science, and the humanities for insights into God's plans for humanity. Again, the Revolution belongs to all of us.

Our colleagues in the English Department take the same approach to critical thinking. Ohio State's introductory writing course in the English Department, which is in no way a remedial course and should be required of all students, helps our students learn how to think critically at the college level. Books that have been assigned for the course, such as *Writing Analytically* and *They Say, I Say . . .*, are sophisticated introductions to critical thinking that help our students find their own voices and gain confidence in their ability to question the thoughts of others and respond respectfully with their own thoughts. Our English faculty, like our History faculty, only ask that our students make the strongest, most accurate case they can for the viewpoints they disagree with and understand the limitations of their own. That's a valuable skill, and one that can be taught rigorously.

It is unfortunate that people who have no interest in learning how we teach at Ohio State accuse us of indoctrinating students. We do not oppose any particular party. We oppose partisanship. We do not oppose a particular ideology. We oppose all ideologies—all bodies of thought that claim to know everything there is to know about the world and how it works. All four of America's major political traditions has contributed to human progress from time to time, but each has at times stood in the way, and in some instances all four traditions have gotten it wrong, as when addressing, for instance, the persistent problem of violence in the United States, which has resisted ideological and partisan solutions. Our message as faculty is the great, time-honored American one: think pragmatically. The test of an idea is its usefulness. If your plan doesn't work, admit it and try something else. Don't keep trying to pound an ideological square peg into the round hole of reality.

As faculty, we face challenges because of the bitter partisanship that has broken out in our nation. Our students are more afraid than the past to speak their minds in class for fear of what their peers might say, especially on social media. I'm nostalgic for the 1980s and 1990s, when our students—Republicans, Democrats, and Independents—mixed it up in class in a good-humored way and gave one another a hard time about their political philosophies. Those were wonderful times to be a teacher, because you could teach socratically by asking students probing questions that encouraged them to flesh out and defend their thoughts with evidence.

Most of our students in the 1980s and 1990s came to us as Republicans, because they admired Ronald Reagan. In the 2010s, most came to us as Democrats, because they admired Barack Obama. That's not surprising. Young people admire optimistic, charismatic, unifying leaders with a hopeful vision for the future. The faculty at Ohio's public universities had nothing to do with the political preferences of our students, and still don't. Every study shows that our students' political views are shaped by their families, faiths, friends, and favorite politicians—not by their professors, most of whom they only know for one semester in one of the five courses they're taking.

If our political parties wish to win the hearts and minds of young people, I'd recommend respectfully that they find their next President Reagans and President Obamas. And if the Ohio legislature wishes to keep America's universities the greatest the world has ever known, please let us do our jobs. Our universities aren't the only reasons that our nation is the greatest in the world. We're an amazing people, productive, enterprising, ambitious, and industrious. But when we work together as Americans, whatever our jobs, and treat one another with respect, there's nothing we can't accomplish. Slandering our universities, claiming that our faculty are anti-American and card-carrying Communists, only weakens our nation, and especially Ohio, which has far too few college graduates to compete in today's global economy. Discouraging trust in our institutions of higher learning, which have done so much to further human progress and still do, is a recipe for national decline and global disaster.

One final note: I couldn't agree more that post-tenure reviews are important, but I wish the legislature had spoken to us about the ways we do that currently at Ohio State. We always intervene when the performance of a faculty member, tenured or untenured, falls short. We fire tenured faculty who violate our ethical standards or refuse to perform their duties in a timely and professional manner. We pull tenured faculty out of the classroom immediately whenever they falter because of injuries or illnesses that diminish their mental capacity. Departments and colleges stage supportive interventions if faculty show signs of alcoholism or debilitating mental illness. And we have a University-wide program to help tenured faculty transition to other careers within or outside the University if they find themselves losing their passion for the job. My colleagues and I would be happy to speak with the legislature about our current system and to discuss ways in which it could be improved. But the claim in SB 1 that tenured faculty have a job for life and are accountable to no one isn't correct. Tenure means only four things to the faculty at Ohio State:

- 1) Protection for academic freedom
- 2) Protection for faculty who take on challenging projects that will require a decade or more to complete
- 3) Protection for faculty who take intellectual risks and discover that their hypotheses are false (it happens all the time), and
- 4) A responsibility to hire faculty who are better than we are, so our university can be the best.

In conclusion, if you would like to meet with me and my colleagues to speak about the problems that we see in higher education today, we'd be delighted to meet with you. I've been at OSU a long time, so I know many faculty who I think you would enjoy meeting and with whom you

could have productive discussions. There are problems in higher education, including escalating costs for students and enrollment-based budgeting, which has fostered a scrum among departments to increase their enrollments at the expense of genuine general education courses. We have a long list of problems, which we'd be happy to share, but SB 1 doesn't address them.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

Sincerely,

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EDUCATION

Yale University	1973-1978	Ph.D., 1981
Stanford University	1969-1973	B.A., 1973

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

1985-present, The Ohio State University, College of Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor of History and Sociology
1978-1985, Grinnell College, Assistant Professor
1978, University of Vermont, Instructor

HONORS AND DISTINCTIONS IN RESEARCH AND TEACHING

2022, Distinguished Scholar Award, Division of Historical Criminology, American Society of Criminology

Member, Roundtable on Crime Trends in America, National Research Council, National Academy of Sciences, 2013-2016

Fellow, American Academy for the Advancement of Science, 2012

Michael J. Hindelang Award, American Society of Criminology, for the outstanding contribution to criminology over the previous three years, 2011

Allan Sharlin Memorial Prize of the Social Science History Association, for the outstanding book in social science history, 2010

Outstanding Academic Books, *Choice*, 2010

Rodica C. Botoman Award for Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching and Mentoring, College of Arts and Humanities, 2017

Outstanding Teaching Award, College of Arts and Sciences Student Council, 2013

Ohio State University Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award, 2009

Distinguished Teaching Award, Ohio Academy of History, 2007

Clio Award, Phi Alpha Theta Honor Society, for Distinguished Teaching in History at Ohio State University, 1995

FELLOWSHIPS

Research Grant, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, 2013-2014
Research Grant, National Science Foundation, 2012-2014
Fellowship for University Teachers, National Endowment for the Humanities, 2000
Research Grant, National Science Foundation, 1998-2000
Supplemental Research Grant, National Science Foundation, 1999
Supplemental Research Grant, National Science Foundation, 2000
Research Fellowship, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, 1989-1990
National Endowment for the Humanities, Summer Stipend, 1987

BOOKS ON VIOLENCE

American Homicide: an interregional study of homicide from colonial times to the present. (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009)

“Child Murder in America” (manuscript): an interregional study of murders of and by children from colonial times to the present.

SELECTED RECENT ARTICLES ON VIOLENCE

“Government Legitimacy, Social Solidarity, and America Homicide in Historical Perspective.” (New York: Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, 2024).

“Defining, Recording, and Measuring Crime in the United States from Colonial Times to the Present,” in James Campbell and Vivien Miller, eds., *The Routledge History of Crime in America* (New York: Routledge, 2024).

“Data Drudges Unite! Taking Stock of Historical Studies of Homicide,” in Karen F. Parker, Richard Stansfield, and Ashley Mancik, eds., *Taking Stock of Homicide: Trends, Emerging Themes and Challenges* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2023), 11-24.

“Homicide and the Opioid Epidemic: A Longitudinal Analysis,” co-authored with Richard Rosenfeld and Joel Wallman. *Homicide Studies* 27:3 (2023), 321-337.

“The Opioid Epidemic and Homicide in the United States,” co-authored with Richard Rosenfeld and Joel Wallman. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* (2021).

“Homicide-Suicide by Women against Intimate Partners,” co-authored with Wendy C. Regoeczi, in Todd Shackelford, ed., *Sage Handbook of Domestic Violence* (Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 2020), v. 1: 318-329.

“Why Guns Are and Aren’t the Problem: The Relationship between Guns and Homicide in American History,” in Jennifer Tucker, Barton C. Hacker, and Margaret Vining, eds.,

Firearms and the Common Law: History and Memory (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2019), 113-133.

“Does Better Angels of Our Nature Hold Up as History?” *Historical Reflections* 44: 1 (2018): 91-103.

“Criminologists and Historians of Crime: A Partnership Well Worth Pursuing.” *Crime, History, and Societies* 21: 2 (2017): 387-399.

“How Exceptional Is the History of Violence and Criminal Justice in the United States? Variation across Time and Space as the Keys to Understanding Homicide and Punitiveness,” in Kevin Reitz, ed. *American Exceptionalism in Crime and Punishment* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

"Getting Things Wrong Really Does Help, as Long as You Keep Trying to Get Things Right: Developing Theories About Why Homicide Rates Rise and Fall" in Michael D. Maltz and Stephen Rice, eds., *Envisioning Criminology: Researchers on Research as a Process of Discovery* (Springer Verlag, 2015), 143-150.

“Emotions, Facultative Adaptation, and the History of Homicide,” *American Historical Review* (2014) 119: 1529-1546.

“Gender, Sex, and Intimate-Partner Violence in Historical Perspective,” in Rosemary Gartner and William McCarthy, eds., *Oxford Handbook on Gender, Sex, and Crime* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 175-190.

“The Importance of Testing Criminological Theories in Historical Context: The Civilization Thesis versus the Nation-Building Hypothesis,” *Criminology* online: Presidential Session Papers from the American Society of Criminology, 2013 (forthcoming 2014)

“Making Sense of Violence? Reflections on the History of Interpersonal Violence in Europe,” *Crime, History, and Societies* (2013) 17: 5-26. Richard McMahon, Joachim Eibach, and Randolph Roth.

“Scientific History and Experimental History,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (2013) 43: 443-458.

“Measuring Feelings and Beliefs that May Facilitate (or Deter) Homicide,” *Homicide Studies* (2012)

“Biology and the Deep History of Homicide,” *British Journal of Criminology* (2011)

“Homicide Rates in the Nineteenth-Century West.” *Western Historical Quarterly*. Randolph Roth, Michael D. Maltz, and Douglas L. Eckberg (2011)

“The Historical Violence Database: A Collaborative Research Project on the History of Violent Crime and Violent Death.” *Historical Methods*. Randolph Roth, Douglas L. Eckberg, Cornelia Hughes Dayton, Kenneth Wheeler, James Watkinson, Robb Haberman, and James M. Denham (2008)

“Homicide in Florida, 1821-1861: A Quantitative Analysis.” *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Randolph Roth and James M. Denham (2007)

“Guns, Murder, and Probability: How Can We Decide Which Figures to Trust?” *Reviews in American History* (June 2007)

“Twin Evils? Slavery and Homicide in Early America,” in Steven Mintz and John Stauffer, eds., *The Problem of Evil: Slavery, Freedom, and the Ambiguities of American Reform*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press (2007).

“Guns, Gun Culture, and Homicide: The Relationship between Firearms, the Uses of Firearms, and Interpersonal Violence in Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (2002).

"Homicide in Early Modern England, 1549-1800: The Need for a Quantitative Synthesis." *Crime, History, and Societies* (2001).

"Child Murder in New England," *Social Science History* (2001).

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

Grants Review Board, Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation, 2013-
Board of Editors, *American Historical Review*, 2014-2017
Program Committee, American Society of Criminology, 2014-2015, 2016-2017
Advisory Board, Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, 2011-14
Ohio Violent Death Reporting System Advisory Board, 2010-
Youth Violence Prevention Advisory Board, 2009-2015
Founder and Co-Director, Historical Violence Database, sponsored by the
Criminal Justice Research Center at Ohio State University, 2006-
Editorial Board, *Homicide Studies*, 2011-
Editorial Board, *Crime, History, and Societies*, 2004-
Editorial Board, *Historical Methods*, 1995-2005, 2012-2016
Chair, Methodology and Theory Network, Social Science History
Association, 1987-1993