

Testimony of Keith Warren, Ph.D.
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 Keith Warren and I am a professor of Social Work at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for over 25 years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to HB6. While I work at The Ohio State University, I wish to make it clear that I am speaking as a citizen of the State of Ohio, and that any opinions expressed in this letter are entirely my own.

When I read through this bill I see a number of potential restrictions on free speech that are truly disturbing and unlikely to pass a court test. (Similar restrictions in Florida's Stop WOKE Act have been struck down.) They are also remarkably poorly defined. I'll discuss a number of those restrictions in this testimony.

Perhaps the most problematic free speech restriction is that on controversial policies, defined as, "any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion." This is an absolutely stunning restriction on free speech for multiple reasons. It is unclear how universities will produce informed, mature citizens if controversial policies are not allowed inside the classroom. I would also wonder how we can teach citizenship without teaching about electoral politics. Citizenship is engagement in the political system of one's city, state and nation, it is not the passive acceptance of whatever bills are passed. Some of the areas mentioned as the subject of political controversy are inherently controversial. If the Department of Political Science cannot teach controversial foreign policy, it can't teach foreign policy at all. Every act of foreign policy is controversial. Other ideas mentioned, such as climate change, may be the subject of political controversy but it has not been the subject of scientific controversy for years. In the social sciences, President Trump has begun to impose tariffs on foreign goods. Does this mean that economists will not be allowed to teach the politically controversial idea that free trade makes societies wealthier? The benefits of free trade are not at all controversial among professional economists.

Any ongoing political controversy about climate change or free trade shows the single most serious flaw in the restriction of teaching controversial policies. A corporation can manufacture a controversy simply by hiring a PR flack. The restriction on teaching controversial policies is therefore simply an invitation to censor classroom debate and thereby make the educational experience of students in Ohio less challenging and less valuable. It is also an invitation to ignore evidence. I have all the respect in the world for politicians (I mean that, they're indispensable to the functioning of democracy), but

their controversies do not determine scientific truth and should not determine what is taught in a classroom.

On a different note, the requirement for intellectual diversity would seem to require economics and business classes to cover the ideas of Marx and Kropotkin in some depth. I have taken a number of economics courses and in them I read exactly one paragraph about Marx and nothing about Kropotkin. I regarded this as acceptable at the time because capitalist economics is the dominant paradigm in the United States, and because it is far more highly developed mathematically than any of its competitors. I would still say that any introductory economics professor that gave equal time to radical left-wing thinkers would be irresponsible. There are many other possible examples. Should the medical school be required to teach alternative medicine? Should physicists be required to give equal time to young earth creationism as an alternative to the Big Bang? Does a course in the novels of Jane Austen need to add something by Charles Dickens for the sake of balance? I should add that in all of the courses that I have mentioned and most others it's difficult enough to fit in the material that is required to give students a straightforward understanding of the subject.

The bill also requires administrators to respond to any complaints about intellectual diversity. Again, how is intellectual diversity defined? It appears to be an invitation to chaos. It would be simple enough for a group of students on either end of the political spectrum to organize and lodge an ongoing series of complaints.

It will be apparent by now that I find it unlikely that HB6 will improve the education of Ohio students, and I find it quite likely that it will degrade that education to a considerable extent. Free speech improves the quality of dialog, and limits on it will degrade the quality and with it the quality of education.

I would add the comparatively minor point that the requirement to gain approval before submitting a grant proposal that includes a diversity component will slow an already cumbersome process and quite possibly cost the state research dollars.

Finally, the weakening of tenure and the limitations on free speech will make it more challenging for us to hire the most qualified faculty members. It's also quite likely that some of our best current faculty would leave for institutions where their speech is not censored and they have robust tenure protections. A lot of people have put a lot of time and effort into making Ohio State one of the premier research universities in this nation, as reflected in our steady rise in university rankings. I've always felt that having a university of this quality is vital for the state. It is perhaps the most important reason that we are on the cusp of becoming a truly major tech center. HB6 would put that progress at grave risk. It's always challenging to hire the best faculty members, and many whom we might otherwise hire will gravitate toward institutions with stronger tenure protections and fewer constraints on their free speech. This would harm our students and our state.

I recognize that many members of the House are also businessmen and businesswomen. I'll finish with a simple question. How many of you would voluntarily

saddle your businesses with a set of restrictions that made it more difficult to hire the best people you can find? I don't think that any of you would. I urge all House members to vote against this bill.

Sincerely,

Keith Warren, PhD