

Testimony of Sarah Van Beurden, 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 Sarah Van Beurden and I am a professor of History and African American and African Studies at the Ohio State University where I have taught for 15 years. I do not represent the Ohio State University but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I feel compelled to testify today about the ways the proposed legislation misunderstands what happens in our classrooms and on our campuses. I do not believe this legislation is in the best interest of my students or my university.

I want to take some time to address a number of issues.

First, the belief that there is no intellectual diversity on campus and in our classrooms. This deeply underestimates our teachers as well as our students. In the classroom, I teach my students

- Not what to think, but how to think critically, how to analyze information, how to debate various points of view
- And also, importantly, how to respectfully disagree with each other

This legislation will undermine good and open classroom atmospheres. Students from all backgrounds and opinions will end up being reluctant to discuss difficult subjects, while this is a key element in becoming responsible citizens.

This brings me to a second element of the bill: its limiting of the discussion of so-called ‘controversial beliefs’ in the classroom. As a historian, am keenly aware of our world -past and present-as a difficult and complex place. We do students absolutely no service trying to ban that complexity (either intentionally or as an unintended consequence) from the classroom or from our understanding of the past. On the contrary: it would be the antithesis of free speech.

As a teacher of African history, it would be impossible to teach students about for example postcolonial politics without talking about electoral politics, South African history without talking about race, or the rise of Islamic extremism in the Sahel without taking about desertification and climate change.

Third, there appears to be a great misunderstanding about faculty evaluations. What is described in this legislation, namely peer evaluations, student evaluations and annual evaluations, are

already in place for faculty at all levels, so including post-tenure. This means that depending on how many students I have in a year, I am evaluated by anywhere between 65 to 150 people each year.

Finally, the increase in administration this bill would require represents a waste of resources of the people of Ohio, both in human and financial terms. It would require an additional and unnecessary layer of bureaucracy and it distracts from our core mission as educators and researchers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sarah Van Beurden