

Testimony of Johanna Sellman, PhD.
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 Johanna Sellman. I am Associate Professor in the Department of Near Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures at The Ohio State University. I teach modern Arabic literature, and I also teach in the Translation and Interpretation Program. I am proud to be a Buckeye. Today, I am not representing Ohio State. Rather, this testimony against SB1 is in my capacity as a private citizen.

One of the things the bill does is respond to what it calls controversial beliefs or policies. Although the list includes a few examples linked to present-day US politics, I'll go out on a limb and say that most topics and questions worth teaching are or have been controversial in some way. The vague wording in the bill invites second-guessing and self-censorship. I'll mention just a few topics in my field that have been or are the subject of controversy, political or otherwise: the prose poem, criticism of autocrats in literary works, and the existence of a distinct genre called "women's literature." As someone who teaches literature, a question I often ask in the classroom is: Why are art and literature often spaces where challenging topics are raised? This helps us think about the role of literature and art in society and think through challenging topics that necessarily evoke different responses. My students include people from all urban and rural communities of Ohio, first- and second-generation immigrants (I too, am an immigrant), veterans, active-duty military members, and people with all kinds of perspectives, experiences, and worldviews. My classes take an intercultural approach which means that we are not only learning from course materials but also from each other. This is one of the many things I love about Ohio State.

The bill rightly argues that students should be able to reach their own conclusions on controversial topics. Students are navigating a complex world of information. They are encountering different beliefs in their social media feeds, their places of worship, their families, their friends, and their classes. I believe the classroom *can* offer a unique space for encountering, processing, and responding to different perspectives, in part because of established disciplinary norms and academic rigor. Before students begin research projects, I like to share the following

guideline from the American Council of Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy. The ACRL's statement on "Scholarship as Conversation" begins with: "Communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of varied perspectives and interpretations." They enter scholarly conversations with their unique perspectives *and* by carefully evaluating evidence. We ask students to do both.

The classroom can be a space of rigorous inquiry. Conversations and research can lead us to unexpected conclusions and new questions. Thankfully, it appears that the vast majority of students are experiencing a good learning environment in this regard, with surveys showing that most feel free to express their opinion in classes. I won't dismiss the concerns of those who say they do feel uncomfortable or say that we cannot do better. How can we create spaces where, ideally, all feel free to freely inquire and express their perspectives? I know this bill is not the answer.

We have several initiatives on campus that support dialogue and difficult conversations across difference. Let's build on these. Professors generally work in good faith to create an environment of open inquiry according to the methods of our discipline and in service of helping students learn how to engage with and use credible information to support their arguments. Of course, more can be done, especially in a polarized political environment like the one we live in. But, I'll say it again, this bill is not the answer.

What the bill proposes is a weakening of tenure and the burdensome, expensive replication of faculty evaluation and oversight that is already in place. It opens pathways for the harassment of faculty and the very students whose learning we all care about. Many of these proposed changes are *antithetical* to cultivating freedom to think and ask questions.

I urge you, please engage with educators as allies who want the best for Ohio public universities. Do not prioritize a quick political win over the long-term health and integrity of our excellent institutions of higher learning.

Sincerely,

Johanna Sellman