

Testimony of Emily J. Weglian, Ph.D  
Before the House Higher Education Committee  
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair

Feb. 11, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Emily J. Weglian, PhD, and I am a professor of Anthropology at Cuyahoga Community College, where I have taught for 18 years. I do not represent Cuyahoga Community College, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute House Bill 151.

This newest version of this bill is an attack on the quality and integrity of higher education in Ohio. The committee seems to believe that anything to do with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is somehow problematic in general, and in college classrooms in particular. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion reflect those values that Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” If we are all created equal, then it serves us to promote that through equity programs that benefit groups, such as first-generation college students and underserved populations in education, such as low income students. We know historically that students from disadvantaged groups have faced disproportionate barriers to higher education that are not in any way linked to capability or intellect. If we want to have a strong Ohio, then we need to have a well-educated populace who are themselves invested in staying in Ohio. Trying to remove Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs from all of the Ohio colleges and universities will lead to students seeking out supports in other states, and Ohio will lose out.

This is a bill that is in search of a problem. Despite the rhetoric, faculty at Ohio Institutions of Higher Learning are not indoctrinating students into one particular worldview. Faculty are dedicated to providing students with a robust understanding of the world, which includes incorporating information and ideas that might be new to students. This is a crucial part of our educational system—we teach students how to understand multiple points of view, and we teach them how to encounter, engage, and understand information or concepts that might challenge their worldview or expose them to ideas that are completely unknown to them.

Discomfort at learning something that is counter to what you have believed up until that point is called cognitive dissonance. It is a normal psychological phenomenon, but apparently many think that this is causing undue distress to students, rather than being an expected part of intellectual development. We help students engage with and work through this discomfort in a supportive way, in a classroom using deliberate curriculum choices. The outcome may or may not be a change of thinking for individuals. We aren't there to lead the way to one or another way of thinking, but we are there to help students see that diversity of thought exists and is ultimately beneficial to societies. We do our best to equip students with strong critical thinking skills so that they can become better citizens. These are not “controversial beliefs or policies.” These are different perspectives that people in our country hold.

This bill purports to support “intellectual diversity,” through the slight of hand of eliminating, as best it can, all but one way of thinking intellectually, which aligns with an extreme conservative viewpoint. Most people in Ohio do not hold those extreme views. My discipline, Anthropology, is built upon the notion that cultural difference is valid and important. Any responsible course in Anthropology will present multiple viewpoints, perspectives, cultural practices, beliefs, and values to students. Learning that people in different places live life differently can be uncomfortable for some students. This isn’t indoctrination. This isn’t forcing students to listen to someone telling them that other cultures are right or that theirs is wrong. It is opening up their eyes to the reality that people and their cultures are different all over the world. This will often lead then to reflection about our own culture, and what about it that individuals like or do not. Again, this is not indoctrination. This is a process that generates thoughtful citizens who can reach their own conclusions. True intellectual diversity does not shy away from engaging with any ideas, even those that we may personally disagree with.

This bill shows a desire on the part of legislators to require certain, very specific pieces of curriculum. When people who are not educators decide to interfere with the people who are experts in education, it always goes poorly. The proposed course in American Civic Literacy is a case and point. Which department would this belong to? Political Science? Economics? History? It is an attempt to push a particular idea about what civic literacy is, without engaging with experts about what it is. It seems very narrowly focused to prevent students from having a true and full understanding of our governmental, political, and economic spheres.

Perhaps the Committee are not aware of the considerable research that indicates a great many problems with bias in student evaluations. Much like Amazon reviews, they often reflect the most vocal and people on the extremes of their indications of satisfaction for courses, and most negative reviews correlate with grade dissatisfaction. This bill also requires the following question for these student reviews: “Does the faculty member create a classroom atmosphere free of political, racial, gender, and religious bias?” The standard curriculum for an introductory level Anthropology course REQUIRES discussions of race, gender, politics, and religion. Discussing these cross-culturally, as well as the diversity of thought surrounding these topics within our own society, is part of what we do in order to understand humanity, the guiding principle of Anthropology. Despite the fact that faculty may be presenting cultural variation without judgement or agenda, a student, who might be experiencing cognitive dissonance at being presented with unfamiliar or unknown ideas, might perceive this differently. Just knowing about difference is often called bias by those unfamiliar with the difference. Colleges and universities already have systems in place by which students can complain about all manner of things—this bill interferes too greatly in the governing processes of our colleges and universities.

This bill also attempts to remove from collective bargaining groups the ability to engage with administrators regarding some of the most important aspects of employment, such as tenure, workload, and faculty evaluations, and give instead sole discretion to the administrators. Such limitations would leave faculty unable to have meaningful and real conversations with administrators about employment issues that are impactful to all. Colleges and universities evolved with a shared governance model. This bill attempts to destroy that shared governance to impose its will on higher education from a very narrow political ideology, which most Ohions do not share.

Senate Bill 1 is a bill that panders to far-right wing constituencies who have deliberately created a panic over content in school and higher education curricula that is largely misunderstood and wildly misrepresented. Banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs and then trying to support “intellectual diversity rights,” is disingenuous. Part of intellectual diversity would include learning about the societal and historical impacts of the societal inequalities of both the past and the present.

If SB 1 passes, Ohio will lose a great many of the incredible faculty we have at our institutions. This exodus has already begun. I personally know faculty who have left Ohio or who are actively seeking jobs elsewhere because of the threats of proposed legislation like this. The Ohio State University has built an incredible reputation as an outstanding school over the past 30 years. That reputation comes from the quality of the faculty. Not the administrators. Not the Board of Trustees members. From the faculty. Faculty are the people who do the research and teaching that bring prestige to the institutions. They attract grants and other investments. They attract students at the graduate and undergraduate levels. We will lose good faculty at all of our Ohio institutions of higher education, and as a result, they will decline in prestige and reputation. This has already happened in Florida. Once this decline happens, we will see fewer and fewer students interested in attending our institutions, both from in and out of state. And we will lose our best and brightest as they seek an educational experience that engages them and does not infantilize them in other states. I know of high school students who have already committed to only looking at college outside of Ohio because of this kind of proposed legislation. This bill is a losing strategy for Ohio.

Emily J. Weglian, PhD