

Testimony of Katra Byram, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair

February 10, 2025

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

My name is Katra Byram, and I am a professor of German at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for 16 years. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

Based on my expertise and my experience at The Ohio State University, this bill will not improve the quality of education in our state, but degrade it. While there are many points I could address, I will focus on two: 1) financial and organizational efficiency 2) educational outcomes.

The bill will be expensive without achieving better educational outcomes, because it will require significant additional administrative processes that would duplicate procedures and policies that already exist. Ohio State already has clear workload policies for faculty. Faculty already participate in Faculty Annual Reviews that assess all dimensions of faculty work: research, teaching, and departmental, college, university and professional service (the work of running these organizations). Compensation increases are decided based on these reviews. New courses already undergo extensive review before they can be added to the course catalog and taught; we already plan for nine months from the time we submit a course for approval to the time we will actually be able to teach it. How much time will additional review take? How will that affect our ability to offer courses that respond to current events, research findings, and technologies? In addition, spending time on these additional review procedures will mean that we have less time to work toward producing the outcomes we are hired to produce: student learning and research productivity.

As a professor, however, my larger concern is that this bill does not promote “intellectual diversity,” but prevents instructors from addressing crucial topics in academically and intellectually rigorous ways. Sometimes, issues become politically controversial despite a lack of evidence or facts supporting some positions. An example from my own field is the Holocaust. While it might be deemed politically controversial because of Holocaust deniers, historical facts and evidence clearly prove that it occurred. Permitting “intellectual diversity” around this topic in a course contradicts the notion that, as educators, it is our duty to expose students to facts and evidence and to teach them to think critically about them—in the end, to reject ideas that do not align with facts and evidence. Further, it will be impossible for instructors to be sure that they are not teaching a “politically controversial” topic, since the threshold for determining that a topic is politically controversial is not—and probably cannot be—clearly defined.

Similarly, deciding whether different viewpoints are adequately represented, and whether outside observers will deem it adequate, is a fraught issue. We already discuss a wide variety of viewpoints in our courses; in one of my courses, for instance, we discuss immigration to Germany by watching

a film that interviews immigrants and refugees, German volunteers and officials, and opponents of a proposed refugee housing facility. Students have the chance to respond not only to the arguments of the individuals interviewed, but also to the way that the film portrays the different groups. Casual readers of a syllabus would not necessarily know this, however, and might presume that the film is used to “indoctrinate” students, since the film is called *Welcome.to.Germany*. This is but one small example of the chilling effect that the bill will have on course design, classroom discourse, and students’ educations as citizens.

The end result of this bill will not be to increase intellectual diversity, but to discourage instructors from addressing crucial social topics, for fear of running afoul of activists, who might have no knowledge of what is actually happening in the classroom. It will degrade the quality of education in our state. In fact, I will note in closing that I am also the parent of a senior in high school who has been accepted to The Ohio State University for next year. If this bill passes, it will certainly factor into his (and our) decision about where he attends school next year, since it will not create the climate of inquiry or foster the rigorous education that we want him to experience.