

Testimony of Mary E. Leech, Ph.D

Before the Senate Higher Education Committee

Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair

Feb 10, 2025

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

My name is Dr. Mary Leech and I am a professor of English at the University of Cincinnati, where I have taught for over 20 years. I do not represent the University of Cincinnati, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

Every term that I teach Shakespeare, I discuss the plays I've chosen and ask the students if they would like to negotiate other plays for the term. This term, I had a student ask if we could read Othello. The class voted on reading this play over others on the syllabus. An overwhelming majority chose Othello. I did not think much about the change, and I was happy the students were engaged enough with the class to suggest a different play.

If SB1 passes, I would be more hesitant to make that change. Othello is essentially about race, and there is no meaningful or ethical way to teach that play without discussing race. If syllabi are made public, is the topic of race going to be flagged by extremists? Am I going to be targeted if my syllabus has the word "race" on it in reference to discussions on Othello? These are not the things I should have to consider when deciding on material for the class.

I do not have an agenda or ulterior motives when I teach. I love literature, and my only goal is to pass that love along to my students. I am aware that not all of them will come to love literature as much as I do, but I have to believe that exposure to some of the most beautiful works in the English language benefits them as human beings. At universities, we do not teach children, we teach adults. These students have the right to make their own decisions on the material I present and have that material presented to them unfiltered. I shouldn't have to think about whether or not my course material will be misinterpreted online, exposing me and my students to possible harm. As a professional, I have the right to fair employment practices, and the ability to fight for those rights through my union. My livelihood should not be dependent on limiting my students' engagement with material so that it conforms to a vague political agenda.

Students go to universities for the expertise of those who instruct them. If Ohio becomes a place where such knowledge is not respected or encouraged, why would students want to go to college here? There are plenty of other states where professors are expected to present their subjects according to the most recent research of the day without fear of reprisal. For the future of Ohio's universities and the future success of Ohio students, I strongly urge this body to consider the consequences of SB1 on the integrity of Ohio universities and not pass this bill.

Thank you for your time.