

Written Testimony in Opposition to Senate Bill 1

February 4, 2025

Members of the Committee,

I am Mary Reiter, a professor of criminology with over 30 years of experience in the classroom. I am a graduate of Texas A&M University, and I came to Ohio to attend OSU for law school and graduate school. I am speaking for only myself and not on behalf of my employer. Through my background and academic career, I wish to share the **three important lessons that shaped my views about bias, academic freedom, and free speech** and how I came to the decision to oppose SB 1.

The **first** lesson occurred when I was a student at Texas A&M. I had what I felt to be a biased professor. One day, I was complaining about that professor to my father. He was one of the wisest people I've ever known. He was a marine, former drill sergeant, and retired as president and CEO of the Marine's Memorial Club. When I told him about this professor, I will never forget what he said to me, and his wisdom on that day influenced how I have come to understand professors. As I was complaining, he said, in his dad voice, "Suck it up." He probably added a few additional cuss words, which I won't repeat here. He told me that when I get into the real world, I'm going to encounter a wide range of people with different personalities and biases, and I'm going to have to learn how to work with them all. He said, "Next semester, you'll have a new class, with a new professor, with new biases. That's the way the world works."

And I did. I have had many biased professors, and at one point, I realized that the ones that I learned the most from were the professors that had different beliefs from me. These professors forced me to better understand my own beliefs and opinions and to better and more effectively investigate, evaluate, and think critically about what I was learning. In fact, I took my dad's advice to heart and when I returned to school, I saw the class and professor that I complained about in a whole new light. I challenged myself to earn an A, and I ended up with the highest grade in the class. I became this professor's research assistant the following semester, and he wrote one of my recommendations to law school.

The **second** lesson occurred in my Political and Civil Rights class in law school, taught by Professor Goldberger, who famously represented the Nazi's marching in Skokie Ill for the ACLU. In that class, I learned about the marketplace of ideas, and the idea inherent in first amendment law that more speech is the antidote to bad ideas - that the way for bad ideas to die out is for them to be replaced by better ideas through debate, discussion, and examination, not censorship. I also learned that government mandated speech, especially in a college classroom where the free exchange of ideas should be inviolable, is inconsistent with the foundational freedom of belief that lies at the heart of all first amendment guarantees.

The **third** lesson was gleaned through various research courses I was required to take in graduate school in criminology. In those classes, I learned that it is impossible for a researcher to be completely free of bias, and that each individual researcher's interests and research agendas are the product of those biases. I learned that the cure for bias in science is through the peer review process, replication studies, re-testing hypotheses, and the use of the scientific method. Science progresses not through bias free research, but through the vastly different biases of researchers around the world working together to move our body of knowledge forward.

These stories lead me to my point, because as a teacher, criminologist, and former student, I know that it is impossible to be completely unbiased in the classroom. There are topics that I delight in teaching and then there are topics that I don't find as interesting but still must teach because they are an important part of the curriculum. I'm sure that difference is apparent to students. I have biases because I am a human being. Requiring professors to be free from bias in the classroom is asking us to do the impossible. This is one of the reasons why we ask students to complete a general education curriculum - so they can be exposed to a wide variety of ideas from a wide variety of professors.

To require a professor to engage in bias-free teaching, while mandating "intellectual diversity", but allowing professional judgment regarding the "consensus or foundational beliefs of an academic discipline" creates confusion, promotes an inherently biased class, and undermines one of the important goals of higher education (and the life lesson my dad taught me), that sometimes you learn the most from those who are the most different from you. In college, students will have good professors and bad professors, mean professors, hard professors, easy professors, and all of that prepares students for the reality of what they will face in the world of work. Protecting students from what one may see as divisive, controversial, or even offensive ideas does little to prepare them to think critically about those issues.

Additionally, if **student evaluations of instruction** are used as the measurement tool towards these goals, and if they are required to include questions about whether the professor is unbiased, it will be quite easy for a math professor or engineering professor to score well on those particular questions. But for those of us in the social sciences and humanities, this requirement is going to be problematic. There is a substantial body of research on the biased nature of student evaluations particularly against minority professors, female professors, less attractive professors, and people who teach more challenging classes (Heffernan 149). Additionally, the research shows that students in general lack the metacognitive skills to accurately assess how much they learned in a particular class (Clayson 18).

Finally, I understand you are concerned with "**indoctrination.**" Anecdotally, I don't know anyone indoctrinated by a professor. Not one person. I wasn't, and I've had some wild professors, and neither were any of the proponents submitting testimony for this legislation. (Maybe I should insert the old joke about not even being able to get students to read the syllabus here). This personal experience is also backed by evidence. Researchers studying whether or not colleges indoctrinate students found that **peers** had more of an influence than professors in changing minds and perceptions (Mayhew et al.). For many students, college is the first time they are exposed to different ideas. That is a good thing. It is what college is supposed to be about, but I can't teach students to think critically about important issues related to crime and justice when I fear reprisal or even retrenchment for engaging in classroom discussions about divisive concepts.

So, I am urging you to not pass this legislation. I believe that it will do harm to Ohio, higher education, my students, and my colleagues.

Respectfully,

Mary Reiter

Works Cited:

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- Mayhew, Matthew J., et al. "Does college turn people into liberals?" *The Conversation*, 2 February 2018, <https://theconversation.com/does-college-turn-people-into-liberals-90905>. Accessed 16 April 2023.
- Uttl, Bob, et al. "Meta-Analysis of Faculty's Teaching Effectiveness: Student Evaluation of Teaching Ratings and Student Learning Are Not Related." *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2017, pp. 22-42. ScienceDirect, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191491X16300323>.