

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

Feb 9, 2025

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

Thank you for welcoming our testimonies today. My name is Johanna Sellman. I am Associate Professor in School of Arts and Sciences 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 encounter 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. Fairness and free speech are built into the models of education I and my colleagues follow.

The classroom can be a space of rigorous inquiry. Conversations and research can lead us to unexpected conclusions and new questions. When 1,500 Ohio Students were polled this spring about the previous version of this bill, SB83, we saw that the vast majority were experiencing a good learning environment in this regard, with a majority (almost 4 out of 5) of students indicating that they feel safe expressing their opinions on campus. My goal as an educator is to ask: How can we create spaces of where all feel free to inquire, express, and be challenged? While we can of course improve in this area, 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. Educators 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. Again, this bill is not the answer. In fact, if passed, I believe it will stand in the way of free inquiry. Many of these proposed changes are antithetical to cultivating freedom to think and ask questions.

Finally, I think we all should be worried that this bill opens pathways for harassment of faculty and students whose learning we care about. Faculty hold office hours, organize public events, email with members of the community, and participate in community-engaged learning. We are accountable to Ohioans. Unfortunately, many faculty have also become targets of anonymous and verbally violent harassment campaigns, especially in recent years. As a public university, we need to continue to build connections with the community in a transparent way even as we protect the learning and work environments of students, faculty, and university staff I do not believe that these goals are at odds with one another.

I urge you, please engage with educators as allies who want the best for Ohio public universities and vote no on this bill.

Sincerely,

Johanna Sellman