

Testimony of Andrea Sosa Fontaine, MID, NCIDQ, IDEC
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Representative Tom Young, Chair

May 16th, 2023

Chair Young, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the House Higher Education Committee:

My name is Andrea Sosa Fontaine, and I am a Professor of Interior Design at the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State University, where I have taught for three years. I do not represent Kent State University, but rather am submitting testimony in opposition to House Bill 151, as a resident of Ohio, mother of children in Ohio, and post-secondary educator. While HB151 is presented in a manner with intentions to diversify voices in higher education within Ohio, the language of the bill is problematic, and clearly harmful to the integrity of academia.

In my own experience, I accepted an offer at Kent State University, and relocated my family to Ohio, in part, because I felt that the institution was able to foster an equitable and welcoming learning environment, while at the same time making space for professors to pursue innovative research. At the time of accepting the offer, I had multiple offers from other public higher ed institutions throughout this country, including offers in Georgia, Pennsylvania, Illinois, and California. I believed that Ohio, and in particular, Kent State University, would allow me to most effectively teach and research within my discipline. The passing of HB151 would significantly limit my ability to continue my research pursuits with rigor.

HB151 would result in a number of our most accomplished faculty seeking new positions outside of Ohio and would also reduce the quality of applicants for future academic positions. As the birthplace of aviation, Ohio is known to foster innovation, however the passing of HB151 would limit our ability to innovate within public higher ed institutions. The proposed workload policy combines all full-time faculty into one category, and by applying an increase to the minimum workload, the bill proposes to effectively increase the workload of 9-month faculty by 25%. Higher education faculty already face increasing class sizes that challenge our ability to teach effectively and are currently at capacity in terms of teaching load, with a number of us already experiencing burnout under the current workload requirements. This increase in workload will limit innovative research, as we simply will have to migrate research time to the classroom. Research is critical to an R1 institution, but also to innovation, maintaining and fostering new ideas within the state of Ohio, as well as attracting students to study within our institutions.

As an educator at Kent State University, I can attest that both myself, and my colleagues already strive to create a safe space within our classrooms where students are free to express themselves and discuss their views on complex issues without fear of retribution. The ability of our institution to recognize harm from racism, colonization, sexism, and discrimination based on LGBTQ+ status is critical in providing a safe space for students. HB151 would explicitly censor the University's speech by prohibiting a university to take a stance opposing these issues.

HB 151 would also prohibit our university from endorsing climate change policies. These policies are supported by decades of academic research, which many internationally recognized institutions and governments already acknowledge are critical to a future on this earth. NASA, The World Health Organization (WHO), The United Nations, and the World Bank all recognize the reality of climate change and necessity for the world to respond. The Paris Agreement, a legally binding treaty on climate change, includes commitments from numerous countries, including France, Canada, Germany, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Australia, Finland, Chile, and the United States. Similarly, the G7 countries recently convened to discuss a global response to climate change. HB 151 limits a university's ability to acknowledge the reality of climate change, and by doing so, we are effectively noting that Ohio denies proven scientific research, backed by internationally recognized organizations, and G7 countries. This is not in alignment with innovation and knowledge building in the state of Ohio.

In addition, the requirement for faculty to post detailed syllabi publicly is harmful to the protection of intellectual property of faculty and institutions. Competing institutions, out of state, and even internationally, would have the ability to access our curriculum, and potentially replicate it, without acknowledgement of the original author. Many of our faculty are award-winning educators that attract students to learn in Ohio. By publicizing syllabi, we are limiting our ability to preserve the curricular strength of our programs.

Finally, the most critical, is the clear threat to the collective bargaining rights of faculty. HB 151, intentionally robs faculty unions of the right to strike. Part of my own decision to accept a position in Ohio was due to the presence of a faculty union, and a clear collective bargaining agreement that identifies pathways for faculty success and innovation through teaching and research.

This intrusion of government on academic institutions, and level of micromanagement will prevent educators and institutions from focusing on teaching our students and undertaking innovative research. Unfortunately, there aren't any aspects of HB 151 that are salvageable, as it is a clear demonstration of political agenda interfering with the integrity of public higher education. The bill perpetuates racism, limits workers' rights, acts as a barrier to innovative research, and denies institutions from acknowledging allyship with global issues, such as climate change. As a professor in the state of Ohio, I strongly oppose HB 151 in its entirety.

Thank you,



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