

Testimony on HB 151
House Higher Education Committee

Submitted by:
Deborah Cooper

Chair Young, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the committee:

Thank you for allowing me to present this testimony in opposition to HB 151.

I am an Ohio resident, a regular voter, and a former educator who has taught at all grade levels from kindergarten through 12th grade. I have not taught at the college level, but I understand the importance of academic freedom to any society that wishes to thrive and grow.

It is through challenging our assumptions, testing theories, and seriously considering a wide range of opinions that we learn and grow. If we stifle our educators, particularly at the college and university level, students become disengaged and apathetic and likely will flee to institutions that encourage them to stretch and grow. Or maybe they will stay and merely go through the motions of learning so they can say they have been “educated” on a résumé.

Education is much more than earning a diploma in order to qualify for a particular job or career. To be educated means to entertain possibilities without fear of censure, to open one’s mind, to think creatively, and to prepare for an uncertain future by applying critical thinking skills to whatever challenges lie ahead. Now, more than ever, we must encourage children and young adults to think, consider, dream, and dare to invent and to challenge. Even if we were to try to reduce education to job training (which is certainly important!), we know that the simplest job now requires complex skills, including the ability to think critically and to work productively with those who may differ from us with respect to race, culture or religion.

Such skills can be fully developed only when educators and students are free to entertain many different ideas and consider a variety of perspectives. We purportedly live in a democracy, where free expression has long been prized. It is why our country has succeeded, and why students from all over the world come here to be educated. Bills such as HB 151 and SB 83 attempt to undermine the free expression of ideas that is central to our society and any working democracy.

I can only guess at the agenda, but I suspect that squashing academic freedom largely benefits powerful, wealthy people who favor suppression and indoctrination so that voters can be more easily manipulated. This is a recipe for autocracy. If lawmakers haven’t seen enough of the ways in which autocratic governments suppress and diminish their citizens, I hope they will take time to find out what life is actually like in Russia, or China, or Hungary.

Several years ago, my son and his family visited China through an exchange program. They learned from a Chinese resident (who was only willing to divulge information in a vehicle she was sure wasn’t “bugged”) that to speak of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre was dangerous and that, because the government had successfully suppressed information about the massacre, most Chinese citizens had never even heard of it. The infamous Tiananmen Square student-led demonstrations were forcibly suppressed when the government declared martial law and sent the People’s Liberation Army to occupy parts of central Beijing. Death toll estimates vary from several hundred to several thousand, with thousands more wounded. The reason for the demonstrations? Grievances that included a market economy that benefitted a few and seriously disadvantaged others, corruption, limited preparedness of graduates for the new economy, and

restrictions on political participation. Students were calling for greater accountability, constitutional due process, democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech. Too many students paid for those protests with their lives, and now, the government's answer to Tiananmen Square is to forbid any discussion of it.

What are Ohio's lawmakers so afraid of that they feel the need to constrain educators and "protect" students? Are they afraid students might challenge the status quo? Clamping down on the free flow of ideas is not only stifling; it is anti-democratic. Students in this country have always challenged the status quo; this is absolutely essential in any working democracy.

Of course students will encounter educators with whom they disagree, as well as other students and educators whose ideas might make them uncomfortable. But there can be no real education without some discomfort. It is painful to grow – to learn – to change. It is also absolutely necessary and healthy.

HB 151 touts "intellectual diversity" while trying to restrict such diversity by dictating the content and manner in which certain topics can be discussed. In what way are Ohio lawmakers qualified to determine academic content and teaching methods? Who will make such decisions at the university level? Will these determinations be left to administrators – perhaps even those who have never actually taught students - to not only guess at what the law requires, but to figure out a way to implement those requirements? What protests can we reasonably expect to arise from such suppression, and what will the response be? Should the state, perhaps, silence protests? How far should the state go in imposing its will on colleges and universities? Is suppression, fear, and lack of intellectual curiosity what we want to cultivate in our society? Is that what you, as lawmakers who live in this state, want for your children and grandchildren?

Ohio has great wealth in its colleges and universities, and students and professors from all over the country – and the world – have enriched our higher learning institutions. In fact, Ohio ranks sixth among the 50 states in its number of colleges and universities. This wealth of options helps Ohio by adding new residents. My own family is a prime example. After my husband graduated from The Ohio State University Moritz School of Law, we decided to stay and raise our children in Ohio. Many other students, upon graduation, have done the same thing, and our state's economy and culture have benefitted. Ohio has also benefitted from the contributions of the many educators who live and work here. Keeping our colleges and universities vibrant draws new residents far more effectively than California billboards urging people to move to Ohio for tax reasons.

Imagine what will happen if HB 151, SB 83, or any similar bill, becomes law. Can we honestly expect the best and brightest students to flock to universities that restrict academic freedom? And will the best educators want to teach at universities where teaching content and methods are dictated by the state's legislature? Will they feel comfortable accepting teaching positions knowing that the ability to advocate for fair working conditions is limited?

At the core of any excellent college or university is committed educators. But because HB 151 would institute untenable mandates, resources would need to be shifted from teaching staff to administrative staff. The last thing higher education needs is a stifling and more bloated bureaucracy.

I hope the members of this committee will take seriously their duty to serve the best interests of all Ohioans – not just the interests of the wealthy and powerful – and consider the many ways in which HB 151 would negatively impact our state.

Please do not allow HB 151 to go forward.

Sincerely,

Deborah K. Cooper