

Testimony of Kristen Geaman, PhD  
Before the House Higher Education Committee  
Rep. Tom Young, Chair  
May 17, 2023

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

My name is Kristen Geaman, and I am an Associate Lecturer of medieval history at the University of Toledo where I have taught for ten years. I do not represent the University of Toledo, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute House Bill 151.

I oppose this bill because it will diminish the quality of education for Ohio's public university students. Although the bill purports to promote intellectual diversity, the methods the bill lays out to achieve that goal amount to government censorship. Section 3345.0219 (B) states that "Each state institution of higher education shall implement a range of disciplinary sanctions for anyone under its jurisdiction who interferes with the intellectual diversity rights, prescribed under sections 3345.0217 and 3345.0218 of the Revised Code, of another" (lines 292-296). The prospect of disciplinary sanctions will have a chilling effect on student discussion and participation in the classroom. Instead of students learning together, classmates have been turned into adversaries who might inform on one another. Students and instructors are no longer partners in education if they can subject each other to unspecified disciplinary sanctions.

The bill's vague wording will also undercut education by limiting what students can be taught. Section 3345.0217 (1) defines controversial beliefs or policies as those that are the "subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate change, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion" (lines 183-187). Section 3345.0217 (4) requires that faculty and staff "allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial matters and shall not seek to inculcate any social, political, or religious point of view" (lines 217-219). It is unclear from the bill how broadly this will impact teaching. What is the line between teaching and inculcating? I seek to teach my students, but am I inculcating if I discuss something more than once? I can only speak to my own courses, but this bill could impact the teaching of the more distant past, such as medieval Europe. For instance, the definition of marriage was the subject of heated discussion in early medieval Europe: how many wives could a man have? What were the minimum requirements to make a marriage valid? Can this no longer be taught because it was controversial? The Christian definition of marriage ultimately won the debate in medieval Europe, but could teaching that be construed as inculcating a religious point of view? The bill is unclear. Furthermore, how can instructors adequately teach the history of, to give just one example, the middle east without discussing foreign policy? Students will be unable to reach their own conclusions if they are sheltered from "controversial beliefs," which they likely will be as students, faculty, and staff seek to avoid disciplinary sanctions.

This bill will surely have a negative impact on Ohio's economy. The state has recently revived the old tourist campaign "Ohio, The Heart of it All" to promote Ohio as a wonderful place to

visit, work, and live. Commercials launched on Wednesday, May 10, 2023, promoting, among other things, Ohio's technology industry and higher education system. If our education system is a reason to promote Ohio, we do not need to overhaul it. There is no reason to fix something that is not broken. Furthermore, this bill represents government overreach, as it seeks to censor what students can and cannot learn. That will make it difficult for the state to attract new students and new workers. I was born and raised in Findlay, Ohio, and attended university on both the east coast and west coast. After finishing my PhD, I left California to return home to Ohio. In 2013, I was excited to return home, but I would not make the same decision in 2023. I imagine there are other young professionals who will make similar calculations and decide to avoid a state that seeks to regulate and censor speech under the fiction of promoting open inquiry.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this vague and harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.