

Columbus, May 16, 2023

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is May Mergenthaler. I am Associate Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Ohio State University and affiliate faculty of the university Sustainability Institute. I have been teaching at the university since 2007. I love the institution, my students, colleagues, staff, and administration. I am strongly opposed to HB 151, as I believe it will greatly harm this thriving institution, higher education at large, and the economy and culture of the beautiful state of Ohio.

Last week, I submitted the third – and I hope final! – version of a syllabus for the new and exciting general education program at Ohio State University to the university’s very conscientious curriculum committee. My course is entitled “From Viking Saga to Climate Fiction: Nature in Nordic and Germanic Literatures” and is course in the new GE Theme *Sustainability*. The course will teach students about how humans depend on nature for both their survival and their enjoyment, as well as for the ways in which they organize their societies. On the background of current science, culture, and societies, and their own experiences, students will critically analyze the values manifest in the human-nature relationships depicted in Nordic and Germanic cultures, as well as the sustainability of the technological and organizational solutions that Nordic and Germanic cultures presents for problems related to human-nature relationships including the provision of sufficient and satisfying nutrition, housing, clothing, means of transportation, or leisure activities. Students will read exciting Viking Sagas and learn about how the settlers of Iceland, beginning in the 10th century, conquered the land and built a new culture, in the process cutting down the forest as building material and fuel, which has led to the current signature landscape of the island and to the transformation of its geology and climate. Due to soil erosion, many farms have been abandoned. Three-quarters of Iceland's 100,000 square kilometers (39,000 sq mi) is affected by soil erosion. The government of Iceland is trying to counteract with reforestation efforts, but it will never be able to restore the original natural bounty of the country. By reading Icelandic Sagas, students will learn about human culture and nature are deeply intertwined and how settlers managed to threaten the foundation of their own livelihood—farming—by following unsustainable agricultural practices.

At the end of this course, students will engage with the recently developing genre called Climate Fiction or Climate Science Fiction, which imagines the possible future devastating impacts of climate change—already harming humans, animals, and plants around the world. We will read Frank Schätzing’s both horrifying and entertaining 2004 thriller “The Swarm,” recently turned into a TV series, that imagines how the oceans’ creatures, including orcas, crabs, and jellyfish, seek revenge on humanity for destroying their world through among other things, overfishing, oil spills, and the acidification of the waters caused by climate change (a reduction in the pH of the ocean over an extended period of time, caused primarily by uptake of carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the atmosphere). By depicting brave characters—scientists, students, and government agents from diverse backgrounds and cultures—who seek to stave this catastrophe and heal the relationship between humans and their only home, earth, climate fiction like

Schätzing's novel seeks to inform and inspire to act. Human-nature relationships that allow all to thrive is a sustainable relationship.

HB 151 will have chilling effect on my efforts to teach this exciting class to Ohio State University's undergraduate students 1) by designating sustainability a "specified concept" and climate change, recognized by the global and US scientific community and the United State's own government agencies, a "controversial belief" on which Ohio's public universities and colleges are not allowed to take a stance and b) by claiming that climate change is a "controversial belief" on which the students should be allowed and encouraged to reach "their own conclusions." To be sure, I support academic freedom and want all students to speak their minds in my classes and learn to think critically and freely. Students always highly praise my classes in their student evaluations for "encouraging independent thinking." Climate change is a developing issue, but that it is happening and worsening is a scientific fact. Sustainability is good for us and for the world. Furthermore, the quest for a more sustainable future is intimately tied to the fight against climate change. HB 151 calls into question the very foundation of the new GE Theme Sustainability and my course that is part of this theme, as well as the university's Sustainability Institute of which I am an associated Faculty as a whole. How will students be able to take my course and me an instructor seriously if the state of Ohio encourages them to see it as an opinion that can be dismissed, rather than based on historical and scientific truths about human culture and nature? How will I be able to teach and create a fun and welcoming learning atmosphere? How will students be able to learn?

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'May Mergenthaler', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

May Mergenthaler