

Testimony of Nicole M. Karn, 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 Nicole Karn, and I am an associated professor of chemistry at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for eight years. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute House Bill 151.

On April 19, 2023, when opposition testimony to the companion bill of HB151 was introduced in the senate, Senator Cirino asked “What on Earth was going on on our campuses before DEI infrastructure was put in place? Was anti-diversity rampant? Was discrimination rampant? Was exclusion rampant at our college campuses?” In response, the crowd of opponents to the bill exclaimed “Yes!” One can only guess why Sen. Cirino even needed to ask this question. I can’t be certain, but perhaps it is because he doesn’t belong to a group of people who have been historically excluded from universities or perhaps he hasn’t personally experienced discrimination or perhaps he hasn’t been involved in a college campus in some time.

Senator Cirino has also submitted proponent testimony for HB151. In his testimony, he states “no one should suffer discrimination or exclusion in our educational system based on their race, creed, gender, ethnicity, or even gender preference.” Yet he has introduced a bill that destroys the programs currently used at universities to eliminate discrimination.

It appears to me that HB151 is intended to maintain the status quo, that is, maintain white supremacy by making programs aimed at ending systemic racism and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) illegal as evidenced by Sec. 3345.0217 of the bill. Furthermore, this bill will lead to increased discrimination of faculty from marginalized groups (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and women through a centering of student evaluations of teaching which are known to be biased. I’ll address each of these issues in turn.

It is well known within science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields that women and minorities- Black and Brown people- are more likely to drop out of a STEM major or perform more poorly in STEM gateway courses than their cis white

male peers (Harris et al.). Why is this? Often, the culture of STEM classrooms doesn't foster a sense of belonging, science identity, or self-efficacy for all students, and can lead students to feel stereotype threat. This is particularly true for students from historically excluded groups (women and black, Indigenous, and people of color). In many cases, this is because STEM courses are often taught by White men. Only 10.1 % of STEM faculty are from underrepresented groups (APLU INCLUDES Project) and only 34.5 % of STEM faculty are women (Yale Scientific). When students struggle to see themselves in their teachers and mentors, they often opt for other majors and careers in which they do.

This white male patriarchy is the culture that this bill wishes to maintain by making illegal the DEI practices that have been shown to improve student retention and learning (White et al., Tanner and references within). Banning DEI eliminates the acknowledgement of lived experiences of all students and turns those lived experiences into controversial beliefs. We need to acknowledge the lived experiences of all students. And, if the goal of this bill is to protect students as a couple of proponents have claimed, then clearly, banning DEI programs is not the answer. I'd encourage you to read the short Letter to the Editor published in Science called "Systemic racism in higher education." This letter, published in 2020, has four authors in addition to 10,234 signatories. Clearly, systemic racism is of utmost concern to thousands of STEM faculty.

I have been part of a working group within the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry at The Ohio State University focused on improving the student experience in our gateway chemistry courses in order to increase retention and grades among historically excluded groups. To do so, we have focused on evidence-based inclusive teaching practices which include structured teaching and active learning. Specifically, we plan to implement problem-based learning in which students work together to solve challenging chemistry problems and to make space for peer mentoring. In order for these activities to work, faculty must enter the classroom with the expectation that all students can learn the material presented, but that each student enters with different exposures to the topics presented in the course. This is what we mean when we talk about inclusion. These types of activities have been shown to improve retention and grades for all students (Canning et al.), not just women and those from historically excluded groups. The Ohio State University has received \$2.5 million in funding for this project by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute Driving Change Program. Under HB151, it is questionable as to whether this type of grant could not be awarded to an Ohio university.

I'd also like to draw attention to another aspect of HB151 in which student evaluations will account for at least fifty percent of the teaching area component of faculty evaluation (section 3345.452). It is well documented that teaching evaluations are highly flawed and prejudiced against women and people from marginalized groups (Heffernan). Additionally, women and people from marginalized groups are more likely than their cis white male counterparts to receive abusive comments in open ended questions in teaching evaluations. Personally, I dread opening my teaching evaluations for fear of the kinds of comments I may receive. By mandating that student evaluations of teaching account for at least fifty percent of the teaching area component in faculty evaluations, this bill will discriminate against women and people in marginalized groups more than their cis white male peers. Furthermore, the provision in the bill that additional post-tenure review be required should a faculty member receive "does not meet performance expectations" within two of three consecutive years dictates that these post-tenure evaluations will result in the firing of women and people in marginalized groups more than their cis white male counterparts. We cannot let this happen.

I'd like to leave you with a quote by bell hooks from her book "Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom." She states,

"... any radical pedagogy must insist that everyone's presence is acknowledged. That insistence cannot be simply stated. It has to be demonstrated through pedagogical practices. To begin, the professor must genuinely value everyone's presence. There must be ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic, that everyone contributes."

Every student, no matter their political beliefs, is welcome and valued in my classroom, and while I can't speak for all faculty, I understand this to be overwhelmingly true at my university. You must consider the adverse effects this bill will have reducing discrimination against both students and faculty at Ohio Universities. I urge you to vote no on HB151.

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