

Steven Rugare

Regarding: House Higher Education Committee, HB 151

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My name is Steven Rugare, and I am a full professor on the Non-Tenure Track at Kent State University. I have been associated with Kent State's College of Architecture and Environmental Design for 30 years. I am proud of the increasing excellence of our programs and the nationally competitive professional opportunities we offer to Ohio students.

My focus as a scholar-teacher is the history of architecture and urbanism. Religion and politics feature prominently in my courses. After all those are often the motivations for major buildings. Like most of us I was told at some point to avoid such topics in a bar, but I never thought I would have the state looking over my shoulder when I talk about them in a classroom!

Why would I be worried? The definition of "controversial belief or policy" in sec. 3345.0217A includes several issues that come up even when I'm teaching about ancient cultures, and the legislation is utterly vague about what kind of speech might present a problem. The list of issues is also open-ended, thanks to the "such as" that precedes it. There could be unspecified controversial issues that I will only find out about if I say something that displeases a student or an outside pressure group. These aren't purely hypothetical concerns, because student evaluations—a notoriously unreliable and biased source of information—will now figure far more prominently in personnel decisions than is the norm in higher education.

How should a faculty member respond to this situation? The prudent course would be to make classroom content as uncontroversial as possible, avoiding *any* topic that might upset someone. This is especially true for faculty at the beginning of their careers. The stated goal of this legislation is to protect free expression against the minority of faculty whose teaching is driven by a political agenda. This is a real problem (with examples from across the political spectrum), but regulating speech is not a solution. As written these provisions will lead to a culture of self-censoring and denunciation.

Let me give you an example of the kind of call we are being asked to make. I teach a graduate seminar on urban planning history. The academic literature on American cities overwhelmingly demonstrates that many current urban problems stem from past racist policies and practices. Most scholars use the term "structural racism" in this context. I will continue teaching that literature because it would be professionally irresponsible not to. I am subject-area expert, not a politician, and my first responsibility should be to evidence and the scholarly literature. As I read the revised Senate bill, it allows me to make that judgment. But I don't know for sure, and I might not know until someone tries to end my career.

There are many other reasons to oppose this bill. It creates an impossibly cumbersome calendar of faculty evaluations. It creates endless reporting and compliance requirements. It will most certainly harm recruitment of talented faculty, as well as out-of-state students. More importantly, it does nothing to address the issues we face. Our students are poorly prepared, distracted, anxious about money, often in poor mental health. It is increasingly difficult to get them to slow down and engage in critical thinking.

We hear all the time that this generation of students will need to be highly flexible to succeed in coming decades. They will need to retrain frequently, and that requires a habit of lifelong learning. One of my goals as a professor is to model the curiosity and teachability they will need. That often means talking about controversies, introducing current debates, taking intellectual risks, and inviting students to do the same. This bill creates powerful incentives for me to stop doing that, to teach less joyfully and creatively. Please reconsider.