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OPPONENT TESTIMONY OF:

Victoria Hickcox

IN OPPOSITION OF:

House Bill 151

May 17, 2023

Good morning, Chair Young, Vice Chair Miller, and members of the Higher Education Committee. My name is Victoria Hickcox, and I am the Outreach Director for the Ohio Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, known as CAIR-Ohio.

CAIR is America's largest civil rights and advocacy organization for American Muslims. At CAIR-Ohio, we provide pro-bono legal services and education to combat Islamophobia and uplift the Muslim community.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to address my concerns about House Bill 151. I stand before you today to express my deep concerns regarding the potential harm this bill poses to the academic freedoms and diversity of Ohio's public higher education institutions.

If enacted, these bills would introduce censorship and hinder the efforts of diversity, equity, and inclusion on our public college campuses. They aim to restrict institutions from conducting any DEI training, expressing public opinions on public policy controversies, boycotting, and offering majors or courses on a wide range of topics, including ethnic and controversial ideologies that can encompass religious and societal courses.

This bill claims to promote "intellectual diversity", but it does the opposite by censoring certain topics, content, and opportunities for diversity, equity, and inclusivity. This would have a direct effect on academic freedom and would make it more difficult for Ohio's colleges and universities to not only retain students and faculty, but also sustain relationships with global partners in China who provide critical funding and opportunities. By restricting these partnerships, we deny our students valuable opportunities to engage in cross-cultural understanding, international collaboration, and the acquisition of global competencies. In today's interconnected world, these skills are essential for our students to thrive and compete on a global scale.

As a former teacher and an advocate for education, I firmly believe that this bill undermines the very foundation of our educational system. Education should be a space that fosters open dialogue, critical thinking, and exposure to different perspectives. There's nothing intellectual about censorship. There's nothing intellectual about limiting academic freedom. There's nothing intellectual about restricting exposure to real people, cultures, and viewpoints. By limiting academic freedom and diversity, we are stifling the growth and intellectual development of our students. We must embrace diversity as an asset that enriches the educational experience, rather than a threat to be silenced.

This bill would also require additional auditing which creates unnecessary mandates for staff. The burdensome micromanagement of academic programs and changes to the faculty workload policy will impact student resources & learning experiences.

I want to draw your attention to the specific impact this bill will have on Muslim student organizations, Islamic studies courses, and more. Having diverse student organizations on campus plays a crucial role in advocating for uplifting and educating communities, as well as providing students with a sense of community and belonging, a home away from home, and a space that students are able to give back to their campus, and broader communities. Legislation and language like the one in this bill would prevent them from even organizing under religious identities and gathering as Muslims.

Defunding and terminating these groups would not only limit the representation and support for Muslim students, but also hinder the overall educational experience for all students on campus. Religious liberty and equal opportunities for all individuals to succeed are fundamental principles that should guide our educational policies. By restricting academic freedom and diversity, this bill undermines these principles and jeopardizes the ability of students to gain knowledge, learn about different cultures and viewpoints, and develop critical thinking skills. This poses a direct threat to the competitiveness and attractiveness of Ohio's public universities, potentially driving away talented individuals from our state.

The research is clear: creating a responsive environment for students is essential to their academic success. It allows Muslims and other historically underrepresented students to thrive, and become successful professionals, and contributing members of our society. The way we have "intellectual" diversity is by celebrating the various backgrounds, cultures, and religions that students come from that inform their perspective on the world.

In conclusion, I urge you to oppose House Bill 151. By doing so, you will protect the academic freedoms, diversity, and cultural richness that are essential for Ohio's future workforce and economic development. Your commitment to upholding the values of academic freedom, religious liberty, and a strong and competitive economy will have a profound impact on the lives of our students, the future of our state, and the integrity of our educational system. And I hope you take heed of the large number of opponent testimonies submitted against this bill and its companion bill, SB 83.

Thank you for your time and consideration.