

## TESTIMONY OF

**Professor of Practice Julie A Cajigas**  
**May 15, 2023**

**Caveat:** The views reflected in my testimony are mine alone and do not reflect those of my employer The University of Akron, my department at the School of Communication, or those of my colleagues. I am testifying as a private citizen of Ohio.

As a professor of practice (non-tenure track) with more than 13 years teaching, I feel very strongly about many things in higher education. One of those is Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as part of the general education coursework. Many students come from very homogenous environments where they haven't been exposed to different cultures, races, perspectives, and points of view. One of the things that my DEI courses taught me was that diverse points of view are extremely valuable in problem solving, in business, in government, and in the classroom. I never once felt discriminated against, nor did I feel guilty about being a white person or a Christian.

It's important to note that DEI doesn't only include the perspectives of my students of color, my Muslim or Hindi students, or my LGBTQIA+ students. In my classroom and educational approach, DEI includes and respects the perspectives of my conservative students, my Christian students, and all students who may or may not share my worldview.

I foster the spirit of respect in my classroom. I have not personally seen faculty members punish or censor students for their political views, but I have seen students act aggressively toward other students on all ends of the political spectrum. That is not something I tolerate. I see my role as facilitating freedom of speech and expression within an environment of mutual respect and tolerance.

I say this so that you understand that I agree that students should feel free to speak openly and to discuss ideas free from persecution. I am a strong proponent of the first amendment for *all* students. I encourage my conservative students to submit letters and opinion pieces to the student paper, which I advise. I work with them

on social media projects that seek to promote local Republican candidates. I listen to them outside of class when they want to share their concerns or thoughts about our nation.

*Here are the questions I have about SB 83/HB 151. You will see as I discuss each that I believe there may be a role for the legislation to help ensure freedom of speech is protected on campus, but I think these bills, as written, will have many, many unintended negative consequences for our students, our faculty and our state economy, and thus I cannot support them.*

**Why wouldn't we want to require diversity, equity and inclusion in our employee training and our coursework?** I still haven't read a single argument that explains why we wouldn't want to require DEI. Practiced appropriately, DEI is not indoctrinating. I heartily disagree with its characterization in other testimony as a socio-political ideology. Students understanding history and culture of groups they do not personally belong to is a step to helping them collaborate with and ultimately work with members of those groups. This is **CRUCIAL** if our students want to work in the professional world.

Earlier this year, I took a group of students to tour various public relations agencies. Every single agency we visited has embraced DEI, as much because it has a positive impact on ROI and their bottom line as because it is what they perceive to be socially responsible. Leaving Ohio college students with no knowledge of DEI and DEI best practices will disadvantage them in the job market.

Our constitution says that all men were created equal. DEI is the embodiment of that foundational American ideal. If there are concerns about the misapplication of Diversity, Education and Inclusion, there should be ways to measure that through student learning outcomes and address it rather than throwing the baby out with the bathwater. I have worked with conservative students taking DEI coursework, and even they saw the benefit to learning more about the experiences of others. A student of mine wrote a lovely paper on the benefits of inclusive classroom environments for students with disabilities. They delved deeply into the research and discussed a parent's role in their child's placement. Without a DEI course, that student would be missing much needed perspective on accessibility, among many other topics.

I almost see the removal of DEI requirements as the opposite of what these bills should be advocating for. Building an environment for tolerance and dialogue is the business of DEI, and that's what we need to achieve the

aims of these bills. We need to make sure that our faculty, staff, and administration understand racial, cultural, and other differing perspectives to ensure students across all backgrounds feel included and respected. It has taken me many, many years to be well-versed in the different kinds of experiences my students are having. That awareness of diversity and desire for my classroom to be equitable and inclusive has made me a better teacher. Shouldn't we want inclusion?

**Isn't the Ohio Legislature worried about the impact on our economy?** This bill is big government overregulation and overreach applied to academia, and it will have disastrous impacts on the Ohio economy and on the ability of our community to access the American Dream.

Because sections of this bill erode the protections of tenure for academic freedom, potentially increase faculty workload, cripple the faculty's ability to bargain for a fair work environment, and limit freedom of speech for faculty, it stands to reason that the passage of this bill would encourage faculty who have come into our state to leave. This would instantly lower the quality of our institutions of higher education.

With fewer top-tier faculty, our institutions won't be able to compete for out-of-state students as effectively, which will cause enrollment and funding to drop. This will decrease opportunities for our regional students. In addition, if workloads increase, the amount of time I can devote to working one-on-one with my students will decrease. That time I devote to giving them personalized feedback, teaching them needed skills, and offering the experiential learning opportunities that help them get a good job after graduation. If I had to pull back from those activities, my students would suffer.

Faculty are not what is draining funds at our institutions of higher education. It's largely past capital projects that were overly ambitious, which were a result of decreasing state and federal funding forcing universities to function more like businesses and try to 'out gun' other campuses to attract more students. Faculty cost has remained level as tuition has risen and risen. If you consider higher education a business, the faculty are, in fact, the product (not the beautiful buildings) – and an affordable product at that. Diminishing the quality of the product isn't going to help schools who are already struggling with dropping enrollment due to regional demographics.

Faculty are not anti-trade school. We don't expect every single person to go to college. We don't look down on anyone who chooses a trade. At the same time, college still represents entry into a higher earning class for many people. **I always thought of Republicans as believing in the American Dream and the role that capitalism and small government play in giving Americans access to that dream.** The University of Akron allows many to access the American Dream. Diminishing the quality of an institution like ours by over-regulating academia would take many opportunities away from our community.

Fewer educational and career opportunities, less economic prosperity, the mass exodus of top-tier professors and researchers, and a decline in the focused, hands-on, experiential learning we can provide will in turn have a significant negative impact on the economy in Ohio.

**Should we allow anonymous evaluations of faculty to determine their employment?** Many of the things in this bill already happen (annual reviews as outlined). That said, is it good common sense to publish student evaluations? Though my student evaluations are consistently high, I have had a few extremely biased, not truthful, vindictive evaluations from students. Some wanted me to inflate their grade, some didn't appreciate the rigor of my classroom. I could go into many stories about this, but suffice to say, if you are going to publish evaluations, students should have to sign their names to them.

We all have a right to face our accusers, and anonymous student evaluations give any angry student the ability to hide behind the computer screen and attack their instructor. Further, if students know that these have an increased role in faculty's continued employment, they may be tempted to take out their frustration on faculty members with the knowledge that they could 'hit them where it hurts.'

***In fact, in all of this, I would beg the statehouse to make sure that students who make evaluations or accusations of any kind be required to identify themselves and meet the faculty member and unit leader for a dialogue after the semester has concluded.*** Students are wonderful; they can also be prone to misunderstanding and to making leaps from what a professor says to interpretations that have more to do with their own insecurities and fears than with the actual words the professor spoke.

I have seen it many times, most frequently in the classrooms of colleagues. I have also had students confide in me that they felt they were being punished for disagreeing with their professor, but on further examination, I

was able to show them to their own satisfaction that the professor was being impartial. Many times, they think they are being downgraded for an ideological or opinion disagreement when, in reality, they have failed on some unbiased aspect of the assignment.

If student evaluations are going to be 50% of one's teaching annual review score, and are going to be published, then they should not be anonymous. If student evaluations will be used to help faculty improve, then anonymous evaluations inspire the most honest student responses.

**Shouldn't we let students draw their own conclusions on institutional racism, oppression, and unconscious bias?** I fully agree that no one should be defined by virtue of their race, gender, or creed. No one should be 'made' to feel guilty about something other people have done. At the same time, some of us do feel concern about institutional, personal, and unconscious bias. Some of us do feel sadness about the actions of our ancestors, and that includes our students. If a student wants to learn more about those things, shouldn't they be able to access the scholarship on those topics, discuss that scholarship and draw their own conclusions? In fact, isn't that critical thinking some of the most important a student can do?

I am all for protecting students' rights to freedom of speech in my classroom. And not only freedom of speech, but freedom from being persecuted by the class including other students, for having an alternative view. So long as the views and commentary doesn't amount to hate speech, and as long as they are not directed AT another student or threatening in nature, I am in support of allowing students to draw their own conclusions and to feel safe in expressing their views.

I am **NOT** in support of:

- 1. The erosion of tenure and academic freedom**
- 2. Leaving DEI education out and not adequately preparing our students for careers in corporate America, where DEI is business as usual**
- 3. Increases in workload and other changes that would diminish the quality of education**
- 4. Additional paperwork and red tape for an already overburdened administration and faculty**

- 5. The inability to bargain and strike to protect both faculty working conditions and the quality of education offered to our students (which is often directly related to workload)**
- 6. Allowing anonymous student evaluations to weigh heavily in faculty's continued employment**
- 7. The resulting loss of opportunities for students who want to live the American Dream and work their way to the top**

Thanks to anyone who has taken the time to read my testimony and consider my commentary.

Thank you,

Julie A Cajigas