



Vincent Clark
Testimony, HB 2531
House Education Committee
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My name is Vincent Clark. I am a professor of history at Johnson County Community College, where I have taught since 1988. My Ph.D. is from the University of California at Riverside, and I have previously taught at the University of San Diego, the University of Kansas, and Kansas City, Kansas, Community College. At Johnson County Community College I have also served as an interim administrator and have, for six years, been a department chair. During this time I have not only taught thousands of students, but have held major positions in faculty leadership, including the presidencies of the Faculty Association and the Faculty Senate.

On the basis of this experience, I strongly urge the Education Committee to oppose HB 2531. This bill will harm students, discourage the free exchange of ideas, impede innovation, and hinder the recruitment and retention of highly qualified faculty members. It is also, I believe, completely unnecessary and will do little to remove ineffective teachers.

The current statute, which the bill would repeal, fosters the free exchange of ideas in many disciplines. Such freedom is essential to higher education, where both professors and students must be able to test their thinking in free and open discussion. This is true in the humanities such as English and history, the social sciences such as political science and sociology, and the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. In all these disciplines both students and professors may sometimes say things that, usually taken out of context, will offend someone who may put pressure on a college administration or a board of trustees to discipline the professor. Without the modest protection afforded by the statute, many teachers may avoid such discussions altogether, much to the disadvantage of their students, conservative, liberal, and undecided.

This bill would also discourage innovation in teaching. Innovations are often risky because success is not guaranteed. Professors need latitude to try new methods, for even failures can help show what works best. Unfortunately, overly cautious administrators have sometimes discouraged and disciplined teachers whose innovations have not had optimal results. The current statute protects faculty members who try new things.

This bill would also make it harder for colleges to hire and retain the best faculty members. Johnson County Community College, for example, often conducts nationwide searches to obtain the most highly qualified applicants. The loss of state due process protection will cause some candidates to avoid Kansas community colleges. In fact, it may prompt some already employed

faculty members to seek jobs in other states that protect academic freedom. Most of our citizens believe higher education is the key to both individual advancement and economic growth. This bill will needlessly imperil our state's prospects in both those areas.

Finally, this bill is unnecessary. During my years at Johnson County Community College I have served in a number of positions in which I have seen the college exercise its disciplinary authority. While it has not dismissed a large number of faculty members, it has been able to do so when necessary. Moreover, fair procedures governing such dismissals help promote employee morale and teaching effectiveness. For all of these reasons, I urge the committee to reject this bill and support what is best for community colleges and technical school--and what is best for our state.