Kentucky Higher Education Reform Testimony, Peter Wood, President, National Association of Scholars

In the last few years, governors, state legislatures, and boards of trustees around the nation have enacted a broad range of higher education reforms for public university systems. In some cases, these have introduced best existing practices to new states. In other cases, they have introduced entirely new reforms. Kentucky already is part of this band of reforming states, because it has passed laws to strengthen campus free speech and due process. Kentucky policymakers should engage in further higher education reform with confidence, because they can build upon legislation that their colleagues have already begun to put into effect in other states.

Kentucky would benefit from autonomous Centers of Intellectual Freedom in its public universities. Arizona’s legislature authorized the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership in 2016, which has become a model for these Centers. Other Centers have been authorized by legislatures in Florida, Ohio, Texas, and Tennessee. Ohio’s legislature just authorized five centers. Kentucky will be able to learn from its neighbors to north and south—and to work with them to create a regional powerhouse of Centers devoted to America’s heritage.

If Kentucky were to create an American History and Government General Education Requirement, it would join ten other states. If Kentucky required undergraduate syllabus transparency, it could follow Texas’ model. If it created a system of post-tenure review, it could look at laws passed in Texas and Florida. Florida, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Texas have all passed restrictions upon inculcating “diversity, equity, and inclusion” ideology in university trainings. Florida, South Dakota, and Tennessee have passed laws protecting intellectual diversity on campus. Florida has enacted accreditation reform. And of course there are far larger numbers of states where higher education reform bills have passed one chamber, or even gotten as far as a governor’s veto pen.

All these are good, practicable goals. But America’s universities need a drastic change of their professional culture, and that cannot be achieved simply by passing legislation. State laws can restrain university administrators, but they cannot change their hearts. We need a new generation of university of administrators, who are dedicated to achieving education reform on campus without being required to do so.

Kentucky policymakers must start by changing the boards of trustees of Kentucky’s universities, to ensure that the board members are dedicated reformers, who will bring about change within each university. If the governor nominates trustees who defend the corrupt university, the legislature must decline to consent to their appointment. Reforming board members must appoint like-minded university presidents, who in turn bring in a new generation of reform-minded staff and faculty. Education policy reform requires education personnel reform.

I have a long wish-list of necessary higher education reforms—for example, replace distribution requirements with a core curriculum; remove all identity group preferences for admission and hiring; remove all activist departments and programs in pseudo-disciplines such as “gender studies”; remove all DEI bureaucrats from the payroll, as well as most of the admissions departments and all the university’s useless therapists; and hold college presidents strictly accountable for putting these reforms into effect. But I doubt these reforms can be imposed from without. Reform-minded administrators within each campus must bring them about.

I strongly urge Kentucky’s policymakers to reform their public university system. They should pass laws as a necessary part of education reform. But personnel is the most important policy. Change the university boards, change the university presidents, and charge them to remake the staff, the faculty, the policies, and the programs. The universities will only reform when a new generation that wants reform is in charge of the university.