



OFFICE *of the* PROVOST

EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

April 20, 2022

Dear ETSU Academic Community,

Last week, [Senate Bill 2290](#), also known as the “divisive concepts bill,” became law. The bill, which was passed earlier this year by the Tennessee General Assembly, has raised concern among faculty and staff at ETSU and across the state as some fear it may impose restrictions on academic freedom.

To address these concerns, I want to assure you that our guiding principles and values remain unchanged. Dr. Noland and I remain deeply committed to protecting academic freedom. Following recent discussions with our legal counsel and other advisors, we have determined that the new law will have limited impact on our day-to-day operations and practices at the university. Hiring, tenure, promotion, and graduation practices will remain the same as will our policies and procedures to address any type of complaint against our faculty. Importantly, the legislation does not create a basis for any new legal claims against university employees.

As an institution, we will continue our diversity, equity, and inclusion activities and remain unwavering in our commitment to implementing the strategic DEI plan. We will continue to offer optional DEI trainings and encourage the rigorous but respectful debate of diverse ideas and opinions in our classrooms and throughout our campus. Classroom teaching is not the focus of this bill, and the bill asserts that faculty maintain academic freedom that allows them to teach courses in their academic discipline in line with the expectations of accrediting bodies. We will continue to teach our students how to think (not what to think), and we will not shy away from tough or uncomfortable discussions.

We have been advised that as a result of this legislation, the university will not be allowed to mandate training related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As all of our DEI trainings at ETSU have been optional, we see little impact to our campus as a result of this regulation. Additionally, the legislation prevents institutions from using state-appropriated funds to incentivize (beyond payment of regular salary or compensation) any faculty member to incorporate any concept the legislation identifies as divisive into curriculum. Again, such

incentives have not been provided at ETSU in the past, and we will be mindful of this preclusion in the future. The university will be required to collect and report certain data to comply with portions of the legislation. At this time, we believe the surveys and data analysis we already have in place will suffice to meet these requirements.

We know that higher education plays a vital role in challenging our students — and our communities — to expand their perspectives and consider other viewpoints. We will continue striving to ensure that ETSU is a place where people come first and the diversity of thought and ideas is respected and encouraged. Should you have questions or thoughts in regards to this legislation, please do not hesitate to reach out to me or to the ETSU Office of Equity and Inclusion.

Your advocacy and support of freedom of speech and academic freedom are valued, and I welcome ongoing conversation related to these topics.

Thank you for all you do for ETSU and for our students.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kimberly D. McCorkle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Kimberly D. McCorkle  
Provost and Senior Vice President for Academics