



27 November 2023

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Miller, Members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Jorge Clavo Abbass, and I am a PhD student in German Applied Linguistics at the Ohio State University. I write to you once more in my capacity as the president of the Council of Graduate Students, the officially recognized student government for the approximately 11,000 graduate students enrolled in over 200 programs across all of Ohio State's campuses. Despite various productive changes in the substitute versions submitted, I remain strongly opposed to HB 151, as is the graduate student body at Ohio State.

I was born in Venezuela, not long before Hugo Chávez came to power. My family saw the writing on the wall; my father, an engineer, and my mother, a lawyer, foretold the misery, the tyranny, the restrictions on the media, and crucially, the destruction of the academy. My parents always wanted me to have access to the best education possible, because they saw something special in me. And they, like most of us, believed that the United States has the finest education system around, and especially, higher education. They left everything they had built for themselves and everyone they knew to give me the opportunity to pursue a truly free education in this country. They always emphasized to me that in the United States, I could learn inquisitively, without manipulation or indoctrination, without selective interpretation of the facts and with an uncompromising pursuit of the truth and of justice.

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In this country, we often think of thought policing as an exclusively leftist strategy, but asphyxiating oversight of universities and the erosion of their autonomy are strategies that have been deployed historically by extremists on the left and right alike. I am here to tell you today that the kinds of changes sought through HB 151 and its counterpart SB 83 are evocative of my personal past and the oppressive regime my family sought refuge from. Additionally, my field of study has required command of German and Austrian philosophy, politics, and history. The gradual erosion of freedom of thought and of identity is a concerning parallel I cannot help but draw between the current state of affairs in Florida, the state I grew up in and sought academic refuge from in Ohio, and the National Socialist period.

I want to briefly highlight some of the most problematic aspects of the current legislation before you. Mandatory DEI programs continue to be banned outside specific exemptions. DEI training and programs only benefit every member of the campus. They empower and affirm students and faculty alike from minoritized identities and experiences, and they create safer campuses for us all. It is because of such programming that I, an openly gay, multiracial, first generation, low income immigrant, have the ability to speak truth to power and embrace the values this country and this state stand for. And if you find the outcomes of such programming threatening, that says way more about you than it does about me and folks like myself.

Furthermore, although language defining “specified concept” and “specified ideology” has been removed, so has the provision that:

“Requires each state institution, with respect to every position, policy, program, and activity, to:

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1. Treat all faculty, staff, and students as individuals, hold every individual to equal standards, and provide individuals with equality of opportunity with regard to race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression; and
2. Provide no advantage or disadvantage to faculty, staff, or students on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in admissions, hiring, promotion, tenuring, or workplace conditions (*R.C. 3345.87(B)*).<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, the latest version also removes language referencing “sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression” from provisions requiring “a state institution to prohibit all policies designed to explicitly segregate faculty, staff, or students based on race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in credit-earning classroom settings, formal orientation ceremonies, and formal graduation ceremonies (*R.C. 3345.87(G)*).”<sup>2</sup> This sets an extremely alarming precedent in denying protection of the identities of every member of every public university campus community in Ohio, and it specifically places our LGBTQ+ community members in precarity. To make such an edit as we face an epidemic of fatal violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people<sup>3</sup> is unconscionable, reprehensible, and intentional.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legislature.ohio.gov/download?key=21641&format=pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hrc.org/resources/fatal-violence-against-the-transgender-and-nonbinary-community-in-2023>



The brain drain experienced in Venezuela, and the brain drain now being experienced in Florida, were and are in great part caused by the erosion of academic freedom and existing protections. The economic impact of this brain drain cannot be understated, and I fear for Ohio's future were HB 151/SB 83 to pass. The amendments continually undertaken in SB 83 are a testament to the relevant legislators' willingness to hear feedback and take into account the significant political, economic, and social costs HB 151 would render upon Ohio and Ohioans. I ask that you continue doing so. Keep listening to graduate and undergraduate students, educators, and even the Ohio State University Board of Trustees, all of whom vehemently oppose this legislation. The people affected are the ones who know best. The purpose of good governance is to uphold the values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You must understand that HB 151 as it currently stands does anything but.

Respectfully submitted,

Jorge E. Clavo Abbass