

Testimony of Elizabeth Sheehan, Ph.D.  
Before the House Higher Education Committee  
Rep. Tom Young, Chair  
November 27, 2023

Chair Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Elizabeth Sheehan, and I am an Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for one year. I do not represent Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83.

Despite some changes made to the original bill, Substitute Senate Bill will do significant harm to public education in Ohio. I have many concerns about the bill, but I am particularly alarmed by the fact that this newest version of the bill effectively enables state institutions to fire faculty and gut programs based on “retrenchment,” defined as a process spurred by “a reduction in student population or overall funding, a change to institutional missions or programs, or other fiscal pressures or emergencies facing the institution.” That vague language effectively undercuts basic employment protections for faculty, including rights to collective bargaining, as well as educational opportunities for students. We do not have to look far to see how such a process might damage even a flagship land grant institution. The “retrenchment” at West Virginia University spearheaded by OSU’s former president Gordan Gee has already led to the firing and flight of skilled and experienced faculty, the elimination of crucial programs from education to math to languages, and, as many WVU alumni and students have said, a reneging on the promise of public education in the state. Ohio should not be following West Virginia’s path in this respect, yet Substitute Senate Bill 83 pushes us firmly in that direction.

Damage has already been done by this legislation. As a relatively new faculty member, who came to OSU from a land grant university on the west coast in 2022, I can report that, had SB 83 or its subsequent versions been proposed before I accepted the job offer from OSU, I would not necessarily have agreed to work for a public university in Ohio. So it is not a surprise to me that graduate students accepted into OSU’s excellent programs have cited such legislation as a reason to pursue their education elsewhere, and there are serious concerns about OSU’s ability to recruit and retain excellent faculty due to the bill.

If Substitute SB 83 is passed, it will make it harder for college students in Ohio to get the rigorous, honest, and challenging education that they deserve. That is because it hinders faculty and student’s access to DEI programs, requires that courses conform to vague principles of “intellectual diversity,” and makes pronouncements about how faculty should teach “controversial beliefs or policies.” I hope it is obvious to everyone that a commitment to high quality education—including diversity of thought—is incompatible with restraints on how faculty teach any topic that “is subject to political controversy,” including marriage, climate change, and systemic racism. Whether or not any faculty actually were disciplined on the basis of the bill, its existence would make it harder to help students to do the kind of difficult learning and thinking and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to begin to confront some of the local and

global crises that characterize this moment in history. I urge you to vote no on Substitute Senate Bill 83.