

Testimony of Jesse Schotter, Associate Professor of English, The Ohio State University
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
November 29, 2023

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and the Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is Jesse Schotter, and I am a professor of English and Film Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for 13 years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

SB83 represents an unprecedented interference on the part of the government in the workings of higher education in Ohio. It does this in two ways. One, by its intentional vagueness around supposedly fostering “intellectual diversity,” it chills speech in college classrooms about “controversial beliefs or practices” rather than promoting it. I’d invite the committee members to visit my classroom. I am not “indoctrinating” my students, as if such a thing were even possible—my students have strong viewpoints and I encourage them to voice them. These “controversial” issues are the very topics that students in my classes are clamoring to talk about. Why wouldn’t they be? These are the central issues in society, the central questions of the world they are about to enter. These are in many cases the subjects of the books and films they’re reading and watching in class. They want to talk about these topics, to think critically about them, to hear their classmates’ opinions. These are the moments when class becomes most engaging. This bill puts a damper on discussions of those topics, and without dealing with them, students will be completely unprepared for the world they are entering—jobs, civics, anything.

Secondly, and even more dangerously, SB83 attacks the free speech of faculty members by effectively abolishing tenure. Through its re-definition of “retrenchment,” its restrictions on collective bargaining, and its mandating of post-tenure review, the bill would make faculty members at-will employees, liable to be fired because of the political whims of college presidents or random legislators. Aside from the absolutely chilling effect this would have on research and scholarship—and the acceleration of the brain drain out of Ohio—have the committee members really thought through the implications of this policy? It sets the stage for political reprisals by the party in power, whoever that party may be, now or in the future. Would the Chair really like conservative faculty members or departments to be let go or eliminated for their political views?

More than anything, this bill is a waste of my and my colleagues’ time. It’s a waste of time for my students, many of whom have devoted hours on top of their jobs and studies to fighting this bill in order to preserve their education. Personally, I’ve now spent portions of two days writing testimonies opposing this bill, time that would have been much better spent actually doing my job of educating the young adults of Ohio.