

Testimony of Christine Morales, PhD.
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
Nov 29, 2023

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

My name is Christine Morales, and I am an assistant professor of Chemistry at University of Mount Union. I do not represent University of Mount Union, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83.

As a faculty member at a private, not-for-profit University in this great state of Ohio, I am deeply concerned with the academic integrity and excellence of our statewide system of higher education. Higher education exists like any other endeavor within the context of a competitive marketplace. The burdensome, BIG-GOVERNMENT regulations in SB83 would make Universities in Ohio less competitive than those in other states. Academic freedom is one thing, but economic freedom is supposed to be a basic principle of good governance and SB83 lacks due regard for such principles. Below I would like to list a few ways in which the excessively burdensome regulation proposed in SB83 would make our Universities less competitive, both financially and in regard to the common good in Ohio:

1. Like most Universities, we face challenges in recruiting students from the region and our region borders several states. SB83 threatens to over-regulate curricular choices including courses and programs offered, substituting political fancy for true market research. For example, Ohio universities could risk losing students to Pennsylvania universities who can freely respond to student and employer needs and thus offer courses and programs based on demand.
2. Like most Universities, we draw from many revenue sources including student tuition, philanthropic and competitive grants, and private donors. Obviously, we have a responsibility to honor the priorities of these various stakeholders. SB83 ignores all these stakeholders, demanding a BIG-GOVERNMENT State role far exceeding the percentage of funding from all State sources (especially for private institutions). The adverse impact on our ability to attract philanthropic and competitive grants would be irreplaceable, and the adverse impact on our ability to honor the priorities of existing stakeholders would be detrimental to those relationships and the public Good.

3. Like most Universities, we exist within a community of regionally connected public and private Universities and educational non-profit organizations. Any adverse economic or community-based impact on other Universities in Ohio can affect us all.
4. While this might be a unique feature of the University of Mount Union, we have a long history of financially sound governance with a Board of Trustees that has kept our budget lean and balanced in good times and in bad times, while continually responding to market needs with needed investments. This long history of agile and adept trusteeship has required institutional memory, personal commitment, and dedication. SB83's BIG-GOVERNMENT mandated term limits on trustee appointments would tend to work against the institutional memory, personal commitment, and dedication required for this difficult task. Trustees who are unfamiliar with a given University or its financial history would be less well-equipped to steer a University's budget and investment. Even if private Universities like ours would not directly face this mandate, the adverse economic impact of higher Trustee turnover on public Universities would be detrimental to us all (please see #3).
5. Finally, every University works differently, but all have some form of shared governance by faculty. When this works well, it means that a University can more effectively meet its goals without additional spending. Effective shared governance is another difficult task for which institutional memory, personal commitment, and dedication are required (this time, that of the faculty). SB83's BIG-GOVERNMENT micromanagement of faculty hiring, retention, and training policies directly reaches into a realm in which shared governance most often works to create these operational efficiencies. Its effect would be to disrupt operational efficiencies, sowing such chaos as to even disrupt the institutional memory, personal commitment, and dedication required to build new operational efficiencies. The economic impact would be overwhelmingly negative. Plain and simple, without the freedom to implement shared governance in the way that works most efficiently for each individual University, all Universities would cost more to run.

While I recognize that SB83 may be someone's idea of "improving" higher education, I believe that the problem with SB83's BIG-GOVERNMENT ideas is that they are far from practical and amount to economically costly, unfunded mandates. Universities are not politically driven; they have a responsibility to honor all stakeholders, especially students, their communities, and the greater good. Therefore, I oppose the politically-driven, BIG-GOVERNMENT policies in SB83 and I do not see any redeeming value in this bill.

Very respectfully,

Christine Morales,

Submitted as a private citizen in the great State of Ohio