

Testimony of Katherine Borland, Ph.D., before the Senate Workforce  
and Higher Education Committee.

Rep. Tom Young, Chair

November 28, 2023

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

My name is Katherine Borland, and I am a Professor of Comparative  
Studies in the Humanities and Director of the Center for Folklore  
Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for 24 years. I  
do not represent The Ohio State University. Rather, I am submitting  
testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

I am against this bill, as I believe it will substantially weaken the  
university system in Ohio, harming the state, its citizens, our economy  
and our cultural flourishing. I believe strongly that this bill will drive  
young Ohioans out of the state to seek education elsewhere; it will  
deter international students and students from other states from  
applying to Ohio universities. All features of this bill work to make our  
state legislators the arbiters of what counts as knowledge, stifling  
innovation and excellence.

I want to focus on just one element of the bill, speaking in my capacity as an expert in humanistic pedagogy. The requirement that syllabi be posted outside of our course delivery systems and be accessible to anyone within three clicks of a university's main page, violates the intellectual property rights of professors. Our syllabi can and will be poached if we are forced to publicly distribute materials that should only be accessible to students who are registered for our classes.

More important from a pedagogical perspective is the requirement for these “publicly facing” syllabi to describe the topics for class discussion. The requirement assumes a teacher-centered knowledge production model which is not appropriate for college-level humanities courses. Courses in our fields are predominantly student-centered; they focus less on knowledge-delivery and more on developing the critical thinking capacities and written and oral expression of students. In the classes I teach, students are active learners. *They* generate the questions that we take up in class, and our discussions work to broaden and deepen their understanding of the material by incorporating into their own readings the perspectives and insights of their peers. Advocates for the bill claim that they want to foster free and open discussion but seem not to understand the college humanities classroom. Discussion is an

emergent process; students are likely to change their perspectives as they move through the course, so early discussions don't indicate final positions on the part of individual scholar-learners.

This discussion-based approach to learning has been a staple of humanistic education since Socrates hosted conversations with young Athenians. It is threatened by the proposed legislation's prohibition against discussing controversial topics. In my classes students explore the unintended effects of global heritage regimes on cultural practices, objects and knowledge. We learn that UNESCO attempts at protection of minoritized cultures inevitably leads to dispossession—a situation that presciently echoes your current good faith efforts to guard against an undemonstrated harm. Controversy is at the heart of every article we read. The point is to recognize multiple, conflicting perspectives about “Tradition”. Your bill offers the antithesis of freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry. “Wokeness” is not an indoctrination tactic by humanities professors; it's a youthful perspective, born of lived experience in a rapidly changing world, that professors work to temper through our classes by fostering careful, respectful, intentional, inclusive dialog and discussion.

An undergraduate general education without a humanities core will yield graduates with technical skills perhaps, but students in Ohio universities will be robbed of the kind of intellectual preparation required of leaders in a complex and ever-changing world. Students know this and will look for their academic formation outside our state. This will be a loss not only for OSU but for the future of the state of Ohio. I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this dangerous bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.