

Testimony of Toni L Bisconti, Ph.D.
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
November 28, 2023

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

My name is Toni L. Bisconti, and I am a professor of psychology at The University of Akron, where I have taught for 17 years. I do not represent The University of Akron, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen, who happens to be a college professor, in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83. I was born and raised in NE Ohio. I grew up during the Jim Trafficant era in Youngstown. My Catholic family runs the full gamut of ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal with a sprinkling of libertarians as well, and somehow this big, opinionated, Italian family are still able to share pasta and wine on Sundays talking about everything from the disappointment in Cleveland sports to the merits of this exact bill. We are a family ranging from judges to electricians; from nurses to stay-at-home moms; from grade school educators to college professors. My sister and I are both faculty members – me at UA and her at YSU. I teach psychology; she teaches math. I am liberal; she is conservative. We love each other fiercely, but needless to say we have argued more times than I can count about politics. We agree on very few things politically, but when we do, I'm certain we must be right- and we both vehemently oppose Sub SB 83. I argue about the merits of the DEI sections point-by-point given that's my entire 17 years of teaching; she simply argues about how insulting it is to be told she's indoctrinating students and how her own party, the party of small government, is betraying what she believes is at the core of her political ideology.

This background is simply to assert that I have no ill-will towards anyone on the political spectrum. I teach 3 DEI courses, including the *Psychology of Diversity, Myths of Sexuality, and the Psychology of Hate*. I pride myself on being authentic as I teach. My students know my beliefs, my ideologies, and my passions. I'm completely open about them because in order to teach students to be more open-minded and engaged in critical thinking, I have to admit my own biases and how I deal with them. There is no way to teach these issues without expressing my own beliefs. I don't teach them to have MY beliefs; I teach them to think critically about their own. My students are capable, opinionated, engaged, and excited to talk through these issues. My classes are never under-enrolled and in my 17 years of explicitly teaching about critical race theory, minority stress theory, racial battle fatigue, and a variety of other theories, I've never been accused of indoctrination. College is a strange microsystem in which liberalism is pervasive and conservative values are under scrutiny. My role as an instructor is to help my students think critically about their own prejudices; not only prejudices towards racial or sexual minorities, but also their prejudices towards Christians, older adults, and even wealthy white men. I have never felt fear while teaching because I'm confident in my own abilities; in my presentation of the research of my field – both classic and cutting edge; and more than anything, in my students' ability to think for themselves. I love what I do. I love how my own vulnerability allows my students to be vulnerable as well. My classes are full of real conversations about Black Lives Matter, marriage equality, antisemitism and Islamophobia, ageism and the great lengths people go to look younger,

Christianity in college students, etc. My students look at each other when they talk; they are emotional; they are learning; they are taking part in a truly safe space to explore their own prejudices, as well as hearing about people's prejudices towards them. These classes don't work with the kind of oversight that you are proposing. In fact, to be restricted in the way that I teach; to be told that my research on pedagogy and best practices in college teaching is inferior to the opinions of individuals who have never been collegiate instructors themselves feels like I'm in the Twilight Zone.

Since the first version of SB83 was posted, I have talked explicitly about it in class. I have given my students the original text – not any summaries of it. I have not had one student (conservative, liberal, Christian, atheist, gay, straight, middle-age, black, Bhutanese, white, disabled, poor, or rich) endorse it. In fact, we laugh that this bill is the one thing we all agree on; for my students, the DEI portion (which is the portion we focus on) is insulting to them. It angers them to read something that accuses them of not being able to think on their own. My conservative students are more insulted than my liberal ones because they feel as though this bill is directly telling them they'll not be able to withstand challenges to their thinking without completely abandoning their own values and falling into line with mine. Those students are not fragile and impressionable. They are hungry for research and information that challenges them. The outcome of my DEI classes often involves changes in their ideology, but not in the way you seem to think. They don't abandon their ideologies; they just learn to embrace other people's as well. They realize there is room for multiple viewpoints. They realize that they can learn about their own white privilege without having to abandon and hate that privilege. Awareness is not indoctrination. It's power. Knowledge is not brainwashing. It's liberation.

If you are a proponent of this bill, I implore you to meet us first. Come to our classes; challenge our teaching to our faces and allow us to defend it. Better yet, talk to our students; ALL of our students; not the few who complain about their leftist professor who is bashing all things Republican. We have an internal way of handling those grievances – and we DO handle those grievances in the same way we handle faculty who are racist or sexist. LEARN the process that we already have. I would venture to guess ALL public institutions in Ohio have ways of handling student grievances for any variety of accusations; we don't need the government to upend that! I'm sure in your world, you have procedures in place to hold each other accountable and don't need us to come in and tell you it's insufficient.

The bottom line is this: please stay in your lane and let us stay in ours. Nobody IN higher education supports this bill. Not the left; not the right; not the middle. Let that be the lesson here. When the majority of students, faculty, administration, and even the BOT are all in agreement, then we are clearly doing something right. This bill has been a distraction to our pedagogy at best and an attack on it at worst. Either way, it's unnecessary, insulting, and based on inaccuracies. Help us, the people in the trenches, fight it. Vote no.