

Testimony of Sara Webb-Sunderhaus, 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 Sara Webb-Sunderhaus, and I am a professor of English and Director of Composition at Miami University. I do not represent Miami University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83. I was born and raised in Cincinnati and have lived in Ohio most of my life. I am a proud graduate of three Ohio institutions: Bluffton College (B.A.), Miami University (M.A.), and The Ohio State University (Ph.D.). I am extremely disturbed by SB 83, which will have a chilling effect on campus discourse and destroy the quality and rigor of the education offered at Ohio's universities.

As Director of Composition, I oversee Miami's required first-year writing course. We offer approximately 100 sections of this course a year, and the curriculum I designed and that is taught in every section asks students to identify a problem in their local communities, conduct research to learn more about said problem and its potential solutions, and then write an argument for the solution their research indicates is the most effective. One goal I had in creating this curriculum was to increase students' civic engagement and awareness, helping them become more informed citizens of their local communities.

This bill will force us to eliminate this curriculum, because some students choose to write about issues that under SB83 would be considered controversial. For example, a student I taught in this course wrote about flooding in her hometown of Houston, Texas; her research led her to conclude that a combination of Houston's zoning laws and climate change were the cause of this flooding. Under this bill, climate change is controversial, and my student evaluations would count for 25% of my annual evaluation. My student evaluations could eventually lead to the revocation of my tenure, if I am believed to be biased. Why would I take a chance that I could be accused of bias or indoctrination by other students because one of their peers chose to write about a "controversial" issue, when such accusations could lead to low student evaluations and the eventual loss of the career I have worked so hard to achieve? This bill will force me to eliminate writing about community problems and will severely limit the type of discourse and knowledge students need to participate in a democracy.

Further, the emphasis on student evaluations of teaching will reduce rigor. As Director of Composition, every semester I review the evaluations of each instructor I supervise, and I know students can share valuable information. However, I also know there is abundant research indicating a strong correlation between the grades students expect and their evaluations of teachers. Research shows that students who expect to earn high grades rate their professors highly, and students who expect low grades rate their professors poorly. If SB 83 becomes law,

professors will be strongly motivated to give all students high grades, regardless of performance; it will be too great a risk to assign low grades when doing so will result in low student evaluations that could lead to termination, even for tenured faculty.

I ask you to please consider my testimony and vote no on this legislation, as this bill will absolutely reduce the quality of education offered in Ohio's universities. Thank you for your time and attention.