

Testimony of Professor Bart Elmore, PhD  
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 Bart Elmore, and I am a professor of history at The Ohio State University where I have taught for over six years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83. I appreciate your time today.

I strongly oppose passage of SB83 for many reasons, but for the sake of brevity, in my testimony today I'll focus on the most important elements of my dissent.

I grew up in the state of Georgia where you weren't going to make it very far in life if you couldn't treat those you disagreed with politically with respect and empathy. I went off to the University of Virginia for graduate study, where students enter through an archway with an inscription penned by the University's founder, Thomas Jefferson, that reads, "For here we are not afraid to follow truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error so long as reason is left free to combat it." The author of that quote said that the university would be "the illimitable freedom of the human mind." That is how I was trained as a historian, and I know that is how my colleagues in the history department here at Ohio State were trained as well. I've watched them in the classroom. I've seen their dedication to the craft. And I wish members of this committee would come and do the same before acting on this measure. Our mission is to treat every person who enters our classrooms with the full dignity they deserve and to allow for the open and free exchange of ideas in that space.

This is one of the reasons why I adamantly oppose SB83. In one section of the proposed bill, the government would dictate precisely what readings we should assign to our students in a history class. This semester my students *are* reading the US Constitution and the Federalist Papers, yet I find the short list of readings prescribed in this bill so devoid of imagination. It reduces the majesty, complexity, and wonder of the American experience to a handful of documents. What of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, or the powerful prose of Frederick Douglass, or the sophistication of Chief Justice John Marshall's Supreme Court decisions. What I see in this bill is the precise problems the Founding Generation worried about when they considered what would happen if politicians dictated the parameters of academic discussion in America.

I'm dedicated to my students, I love them so very much, which is why I'm here even though any educator could tell you this is probably the worst possible time to schedule a hearing on higher education given that it is the most critical moment for our students as they head into

finals week. Which is why I'll have to be brief in my remarks today so I can return to what is most important: teaching our next generation of young people to find *their own* voice by investigating a much more expansive, brilliant, and inspiring history of the United States than is offered here in the language of this bill.

But before I go, let me just say that as someone who has had the profound pleasure of teaching at many wonderful institutions across this great country, I can tell you this bill will do irreparable harm to this state. It will give the smartest and brightest people pause as they consider whether to take a job here. The Ohio State University is an engine of Ohio's economy, but it can't be that engine if we can't attract the best talent to join our ranks and this bill will prevent us from doing just that.

I'll end with one final remark. Paraphrasing from another great figure from our collective American past, let me just say that Ohio State is a big university, and there are those who love it. Don't ruin this place. I urge you to pause, listen, as Lincoln would put it, to "the better angels of our nature," and come meet with faculty in fellowship in our classrooms to work with us as allies rather than adversaries to perfect this place we all care about. I welcome you to campus. I hope you'll accept the invitation before acting on this bill. Thank you.