

December 5, 2023

Higher Education Committee, Ohio House of Representatives

Dear Committee Members,

I am writing to express my strong objection to the Ohio Senate Bill 83 in its current substitute version (I\_135\_0330-11). The bill is an obvious bad faith attempt by members of the House to undermine the integrity of education in Ohio's public universities.

While the SB 83 claims that it seeks to work against indoctrination of any social, political, or religious point of view (a worthy goal), the bill's provisions restrict the ability of students and instructors to explore ideas without worrying about ideological boundaries and attempts to use fear to restrict the ability of teachers and students to freely explore and develop their intellectual curiosity, disciplinary rigor, and ethics.

The bill talks about attempts to stop "indoctrination," but it is unclear how this is defined or put into practice. I have spent years (and mostly in great institutions of learning in the state of Ohio) developing expertise in the historic discipline. A basic principle of good history research, writing, learning, and teaching means that we *must* accept the past, be willing to engage with the social, political, and religious points of view of the past to understand it. Attempting to limit students' engagement with controversial ideas only serves to limit their intellectual development and significantly impacts the ability of students to develop their own critical thinking skills.

SB83 does not explain how aspects of the bill will be enforced. It states that it will require universities to publish all course syllabi in a format "searchable by keywords and phrases" which seems to only add a new layer of work to adjunct instructors and professors who have more important things to do, including working with their students and contributing to the research agendas of Ohio's wonderful public universities. I can assume the motivation behind this provision is to create an easy and universal way for anyone with internet access to seek out and harass faculty or instructors who dare to mention topic, concepts, people, or sources with which they degree. Why should we promote such an attack on teachers? One could also assume that this is based on a false premise – perhaps the SB 83's supporters think that if the syllabi of university courses are available, they will be able to finally find those sections where instructors are told they must adopt the political viewpoints of their professors. Having been a student in two universities in Ohio and having served as a teaching assistant in several courses, I can assure you that they will find no such instruction.

If the bill passes, what will the bothersome censors from the state be looking for? Maybe they will be surprised to find out that courses in US history talk about racism, white supremacy, nativism, exploitation, gender discrimination, class conflict, and other concepts that will make readers uncomfortable? Maybe their purpose is to instead water down the teaching of history to the point where it is no longer a serious field of study, but instead a fairytale version of history.

Believing such a mythological version of history is immature and only does a disservice to the public, who nonetheless must grapple with the legacy of the past. Would it not be better if they were able to do so with an understanding of the history which they, by virtue of their existence, have inherited?

The bill is alarming in its implications for history and historians. As the American Historical Association (AHA) has noted the SB 83 stipulates that all faculty must assign ten specific historical sources in their entirety and that students must “pass a cumulative final examination at the conclusion of the course that assesses student proficiency about the documents” required under law. This bill therefore takes fundamental decisions about the content and structure of a core general education course out of the hands of qualified faculty and departments, forcing educators to prioritize the wishes of the state legislature over the needs and interests of students. This is simply an attempt to disrupt the learning process and does not represent an attempt to improve quality civic or historical education in the state of Ohio.

Universities already have an extensive system in place to evaluate faculty performance, mediate grievances, and govern themselves in accordance with widely held principles. They also have spent far more time and developed far more expertise on the guiding questions of how to teach, write, and research history. Given the way that SB 83 is written, the purpose of the bill is not to improve the quality of education but is set on interfering in the affairs of higher education and to bully educators with whom they disagree out of the profession. Doing so, however, only seeks to undermine the prestige of Ohio’s universities and destroy what so many educators and researchers have worked to develop. As a former high school student from the public school system in Ohio who went on to study history at the bachelor’s and doctoral level in Ohio, I can tell you that this would be a huge mistake.

It's true that history is uncomfortable and that exploring the past means confronting the difficult realization that the world has been shaped by conflicts over wealth that have been mediated by divisions among human societies along class and racial lines. This is a fact of history; it is not a theory or ideology. Ignoring or downplaying this truth is harmful because it makes it impossible to create the space for coming to terms with the past, improving ourselves, and creating space for healing. One can determine therefore that SB 83, which pretends to be a response to public concerns about history education, is something else entirely. Most Ohioans and most Americans support the work of historians and advocate for embracing truth over lies. This is not a partisan issue. As the AHA’s recent study pointed out, three quarters of both Republicans and Democrats supported teaching history about “harm that some groups did to others,” even if it causes students some discomfort. (<https://www.historians.org/history-culture-survey>)

I have had the great opportunity to graduate from Bowsher High School in Toledo, Ohio, where I first fell in love with the study of history. I was then motivated to continue my studies in history at the University of Cincinnati (B.A., 2014). After developing linguistic expertise in three languages and earning an MA outside of the state, I returned to Ohio State to complete my PhD in history (expected 2025). I can tell you that the wonderful training by excellent historians at these institutions has been a life-changing experience and has allowed me to develop an incredibly nuanced understanding of the past. Passing SB 83 will deprive many students like me

of the same opportunity and would therefore be a huge disgrace to the state and its institutions. For these reasons I strongly oppose the passage of this bill. Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Nicholas Seay

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The Ohio State University