



Testimony to the House Higher Education Committee

Senate Bill 83

Wednesday, November 6, 2023

Chairman Young, Vice Chair Manning, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Substitute Senate Bill 83 (SB 83). I am Jack Hershey, President and CEO of the Ohio Association of Community Colleges (OACC), which represents the trustees and presidents of all twenty-three of the Ohio's public community colleges.

As open access institutions, we are first and foremost designed to be inclusive and welcoming to all. Our mission is what makes us unique within the American higher education system, and what makes us such valuable partners to local businesses looking for a modern workforce. That mission keeps us committed to creating welcoming opportunities for all students, regardless of their background, educational preparation, political persuasion, race, or age.

This commitment to our open-access mission means that not only do we accept all who apply to our colleges, but that we must strive to create a campus culture where all who would seek to apply should feel openly welcomed at a community college. Unlike many universities that undergo a months-long selective admissions process to choose their student body, ensuring they are a good fit for the culture and academic profile they want to establish on campus, community colleges are designed to serve all students and the communities where they are located. Over 90% of students at one of our colleges come from the region and remain in their community after completing the credential or degree. This is not surprising when you consider that the average community college student is 28 years old, working at least one job, all while raising family or caring for a family member. Additionally, most of the faculty and staff at a community college also primarily come from the area.

It is not easy to serve a body as diverse in background and goals, and yet we proudly embrace this mission. Our faculty and staff are fully committed to providing a robust education that prepares students not just for their careers, but also to be engaged citizens in their communities. It is crucial that our institutions of higher education foster discourse and dialogue through the free expression of ideas, thoughts, and perspective, regardless of political or philosophical viewpoints. This is why we agree with the goals of Senator Cirino and others on all sides of this debate who want to ensure Ohio's colleges and universities protect the freedom of speech and expression, encourage the diversity of thought, and foster a culture of respect and intellectual diversity.

While we don't select the students we serve, Ohio's community colleges take pride in the fact that our student enrollments mirror the communities in which they are located. That is why students at community colleges constitute the most diverse sector in the state. We believe

that the distinctions in our mission, job-focused academic pathways designed for in-demand jobs in the region, and our commitment to remain affordable and accessible are significant factors contributing to the fact that many of the issues identified in SB 83 have not been reported as widespread concerns across community colleges.

As part of that stated mission to ensure that we remain open and welcoming to all, you will also see community colleges hesitate to publicly express opinions on issues that have become controversial or divisive throughout the community. There are provisions within this legislation that fall into that category, and therefore our association will refrain from weighing in on those topics in this testimony. As publicly funded institutions, we must remain a trusted education partner to all in our community. The OACC notes that the committee has heard from numerous community college faculty and students throughout the state, and we encourage you to listen to and carefully consider their views and how this bill could impact their profession and experiences as you continue to deliberate on this bill.

Community college leaders agree with notion that it is critical for institutions of higher education to foster civil and fair discourse and dialogue through the free expression of ideas, thought and perspective – regardless of political or philosophical views. We firmly believe that Ohio community colleges are places where this regularly occurs.

Since SB 83 was first introduced, OACC has engaged in several meetings and conversations with Senator Cirino, Chairman Young, legislators, and caucus staff to better understand how this bill would impact our colleges and to discuss potential amendments to provisions throughout the legislation.

Thanks to these discussions, several changes have been made since the bill was first introduced earlier this year. Many of the modifications in the latest substitute version of SB 83 recognize the uniqueness of our public two-year institutions and the critical role they play in serving our students, communities, and local employers:

- Provides alternative requirements for community colleges to post a “general syllabus” for a course rather than an individual syllabus for each class. This change acknowledges the unique scheduling, faculty assignment, and enrollment practices of community colleges compared to our four-year partners.
- Exempts College Credit Plus courses delivered at a high school by a high school faculty member from the requirements regarding posting of course syllabi.
- Requires institutions to adopt a statement of commitment rather than incorporating the list of declarations into each college or university’s mission statement.
- Applies the requirement for annual evaluations of faculty requirements and metrics to fulltime faculty members only, excluding adjunct faculty, who are often contractually hired on a term-by-term basis.

- Replaces a potentially arduous process for DEI by removing the requirement for seeking prior authorization from the Chancellor of ODHE. It also adds a list of exemptions if a course or training is required to comply with state or federal laws or regulations, licensure standards, accreditation requirements, or grant agreements.
- Applies the American government or history course requirement only to baccalaureate degrees, and not credentials or associate degrees.
- Clarifies that community colleges that do not currently have a tenure policy for faculty would not be inadvertently required to establish one because of this legislation.
- Requires that Chancellor to establish guidelines and forms to be used by public colleges and universities for the reports and policy requirements under SB 83.

OACC appreciates Senator Cirino, Chairman Young, and members of this committee for attentively listening to the diverse array of questions raised by numerous stakeholders. We appreciate your willingness to address several of the compliance and policy concerns that have been identified throughout the process.

As open access institutions, Ohio's community colleges take seriously our responsibility to be welcoming to individuals from all backgrounds and beliefs while supporting their pursuit of higher education. The realization of a better future hinges on our capacity to formulate the ideas and strategies that will meet the evolving challenges of a dynamic world. The promise that America holds can only be met through honest, respectful discourse that encourages an open exchange of thoughts and ideas. We sincerely appreciate you listening to ours.