

Senators Cirino Sponsor Testimony
Senate Bill 83
3/22/23

Chairman Johnson, Ranking Member Ingram and members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to introduce and provide Sponsor Testimony on Senate Bill 83, the Higher Education Enhancement Act. This bill is the result of many months of development and over a year of my own research.

This bill is aptly titled because it recognizes that, in Ohio, we are blessed with 14 public universities and 23 community colleges conveniently located around the state to bring post-secondary education to Ohio students and out of state students as well. We are also blessed with an array of 57 private colleges and universities, as well.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, at its core, SB 83 is all about the students. In Ohio, we have made many great strides in access and we are making good progress on the affordability issue by restricting tuition and fee increases and increased college aid.

The next line of focus for us is 'quality.' Our students and their families spend tens of thousands of dollars, and often assume large debt loads that will encumber them for years. They deserve the very best education we can deliver to them so that they can graduate, begin their careers, and earn an income that will allow them to pay off their debts. After all, going into debt for a solid education is a good investment so long as you find a well-paying job in the career of your choice. Also, Ohio's economic future requires that we graduate students who have been taught how to think, not what to think. They need to be trained how to analyze problems and evaluate policies by looking at all sides of the issue. Graduates skilled in these areas will clearly be attractive to companies expanding in Ohio or looking to locate in Ohio.

SB 83 is a much needed course correction for our institutions of higher learning. This course correction is needed now so that we do not end up with institutions that are more focused on social engineering rather than true intellectual diversity of thought and the teaching of useful analytical skills.

This bill covers a variety of issues relating to higher education, and I will review them shortly. Let us start by reviewing one major component of the bill. That is the issue of diversity, equity and inclusion. In Ohio, the DEI infrastructure has been in place for some time now. Departments have been established, leaders hired, courses developed and litmus tests have been instituted. In fact, it has been reported that our beloved flagship university now has a DEI staff of 94, and they plan to spend millions more on faculty, training and programs.

We have had Title VI and Title IX for some time now, and they should suffice to protect individuals who need protection. In fact, our institutions have long supported compliance staff to make sure that compliance with federal law is maintained. I certainly agree with the goal that no

one should suffer discrimination or exclusion in our educational system based on their race, creed, gender, ethnicity, or even gender preference. The question is, do we need this massive and costly infrastructure on top of the Title VI and Title IX offices to accomplish that? In my view and that of many, we do not.

The fact is, this DEI infrastructure is a popular tool to promote social engineering and not to promote true intellectual diversity, which should be at the core of a well-rounded education. These programs undermine the first amendment, will take us down the path of indoctrination of our students, and will rob them of the opportunity to learn and think for themselves.

Additionally, these policies of hiring and promoting only those who agree with this monolithic orthodoxy will only result in our institutions' staff and faculty collectively thinking the same thing, and a lack of exposure to anyone who might think differently. The result will be no diversity of thought and I do not believe that is what we want.

If anyone thinks that I am overreacting, we only have to look at the Stanford Law School incident last week, where Judge Stuart Duncan of the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals was shouted down, insulted, cursed at, and interrupted during his attempted presentation. While campus protests should be tolerated, if conducted in the right way, this one was particularly troubling because the Associate Dean of the university, equity and inclusion, Tirien Steinback, was present and did nothing to protect the Judge's right to express his opinion. In fact, she actually sent emails to students before the event inciting them about some of his judicial decisions. At one point, she took the microphone and took a speech out of her folder and discussed her view that "The juice might not be worth the squeeze," meaning that the Judge's First Amendment right to speak freely may not be worth defending because it might offend some people. Her only defense of free speech was when she said, "Me and my people... do believe in free speech." She did nothing to quell the threatening environment and the Judge ultimately had to be escorted out by U.S. Marshalls.

The important take-away here is that she appears to believe that her students should be taught that 'jeering contempt' is a valuable method of persuasion as opposed to a genuine, intellectual discussion and debate. A tuition refund is surely in order here. Therefore, DEI can, is and will go wrong, and it is going on in Ohio. It will hurt our students and ruin the credibility of our colleges and universities.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I appreciate your patience with my lengthy testimony, but this is truly an urgent matter for us to attend to.

I will now briefly mention some of the other key components of SB 83.

1. Mandatory Trustee Training

We truly appreciate the time and talent that our volunteer trustees give us. As the governance board, they need to be exposed to a wide variety of issues in higher education. This bill will

mandate a consistent and well-rounded training regimen that will serve Ohio well without placing an undue burden on our trustees.

2. Syllabus Transparency

Students, families and taxpayers have a right to know about the course content, reading and professors at our state institutions. This part of the bill will make this information readily and easily available.

3. Mission Statement

This bill will require mission statements to clearly state their commitment to diversity of thought and the First Amendment, along with other directives in the bill.

4. American History/Citizenship Course

Each student receiving an Associate's Degree or Bachelor's Degree will be required to take three hours of prescribed courses in American history, civics and government, or other related courses. I think we would all agree that our students need to have a fundamental understanding of our country, our founding documents and economic systems, and yes, they need to study the good, the bad, and the ugly.

5. Cost Transparency

This part of the bill directs our state institutions to provide specific cost breakdowns as a part of the budget process in the future. As the legislature provides substantial funding, it will be critical to understand how costs are being managed.

6. The last three are relationships with the People's Republic of China, a strike prohibition to protect what students have paid for, as well as mandatory faculty performance and post-tenure reviews in a consistent manner.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I do not wish to see any student or employee at our state institutions face any kind of discrimination or exclusion. We have laws to protect against these practices. I believe from the bottom of my heart that education is the surest ticket out of poverty and it is our collective job to make it available to anyone who wants it. Let us just make sure that for all of this effort and dollars, we are delivering the right kind of education.

SB 83 is truly an urgent course correction to protect Ohio students and the integrity of our universities and colleges. All of the issues dealt within this bill relate to delivering quality. During the course of these hearings, you will hear from a variety of experts in the higher education field who will opine on the bill or parts of it. I look forward to robust hearings as we move this bill along. Thank you and I am happy to take any questions.