

Ohio Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senate Bill 83
Opponent Testimony
April 19, 2023

Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Stephen David. I am a licensed social worker and staff member at a state university where I do civic education, nonpartisan voter engagement, and advocacy training for students, social work practitioners, and community partners. I am here today to speak in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

I wish to focus today on the pieces of this bill pertaining to what Sen. Cirino called the “good citizenship standard.” As a public educator, I see a disconnect, or lack of understanding, in this legislation of how students actually learn to be active and engaged citizens in what we hope continues to be a functioning democracy.

As part of my work, I coordinate an annual student advocacy trip to Washington DC. I conduct training for students on their legislative research, assist them in developing their talking points and materials, and provide guidance as they conduct legislative visits with our congressional offices. This is a transformational process for our students to see that their personal and professional stories resonate with policymakers in the halls of congress. The data that we collect shows growth in their confidence and commitment to continue engaging in the political and legislative process.

SB83 would ban universities from endorsing, opposing, commenting or taking action on the public policy controversies of the day. Through our DC program, we very much provide institutional support to comment and take action on these very issues. But it is through this active engagement with the topics our students select; topics like mass incarceration, disability justice, and abortion, that students grow and learn to use their voices. It is by directly engaging in these conversations students understand the power of their voices and become inspired to engage the political process to solve the problems we are facing together. This is how we teach good citizenship.

You do not learn citizenship by simply mandating that people read the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers. And the disconnect in these content mandates is striking. That a bill which would ban diversity, equity, and inclusion training itself reflects the need for it. Of the six texts explicitly named in this bill, all of them are written by men, and five of the six are written by white men. Women, people of color, and queer people have made important contributions to American history. Yet this bill seeks to mandate its own version of American history where these other voices do not exist and does so under the label of intellectual diversity.

I am also active in the recruitment process for new faculty for our college. Candidates are already expressing to me their concerns about coming to Ohio due to the political environment being fostered around higher education in this state. We cannot build the Ohio of the future, that Ohio that all our students deserve, and our workforce requires, if we continue down this path of empty ideological attacks on our colleges and universities. You cannot attract the talented students and instructors needed to build Ohio’s future by signaling that this state is hostile toward learning accurate history, free academic inquiry, and active engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time.

There are certainly issues that we need to address in higher education. Access, affordability, longstanding racial inequities in enrollment, need for flexibility in pathways and increased student support. It is unfortunate that instead this body seeks to install its own political litmus test for members who want to align with the standard talking points around demonizing higher education for political posturing, rather than working on real issues. We could be using this process collaboratively address how we build the higher education infrastructure that allows our students to be active, engaged citizens in a diverse and interconnected world. Instead, we are spending our time on content mandates done in the name of free speech.

I urge you to vote not on SB83 and welcome a constructive conversation on enhancing higher education in the future.



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