



Testimony of David Ruderman, PHD
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
April 16, 2023, 2023

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is David Ruderman, and I am an associate professor of English Language and Literature at The Ohio State University, Newark, where I have taught for 14 years. I do not represent Ohio State but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

As a professor who teaches at a regional campus of a large public university, I believe that SB 83, if passed, would have devastating effects. Although the Newark campus of OSU is a regional campus, we have the most diverse student body of all OSU campuses, including Columbus. In my 14 years of teaching at OSU Newark, I've learned that this diversity divides primarily into two groups, with a not insubstantial amount of overlap, namely, first-generation college students, many of whom come from working-class and working-poor backgrounds, and students from underrepresented racial, ethnic, religious, and national identities. When I teach a class on "the literatures of addiction" or the "literatures of class struggle," there are opportunities for these students to learn not only about literary forms and genres, personal and collective histories and struggles, but also about each other. In other words, as individuals with distinctly different backgrounds, they are able to recognize their own struggles—often against discrimination, stigmatization, precarity, and oppression—in another student's story. In my opinion, this is a profoundly important, almost sacred, moment in the classroom, at least as important as learning to scan a sonnet or recognize free indirect discourse in a novel. While, as primarily a poetry professor, critical-race and queer theory are not at the top of my teaching and research agenda, they do play important parts. I couldn't imagine, for example, teaching my "literatures of class struggle" course without assigning the works of Angela Davis, George Jackson, and Fred Moten on racial capitalism. The chilling effect of SB83 would make these important readings next to impossible to assign or discuss, which, one can't help but wonder, might be exactly the point of the authors of this bill. If you pass this bill, you will say to BIPOC and LGBTQ+ students, "your ideas, not to mention your liberation, are unimportant"; even worse, "*you*—as people—are unimportant."

Furthermore, it's hard not to see SB83 as part of a larger concerted attack on the humanities. The near-exclusive emphasis on STEM teaching and research in our society is not only about the further corporatizing and neo-liberalizing of higher education, but also about quashing the emancipatory and revolutionary power of studying in the humanities and social sciences. In over 20 years of teaching undergraduates, I've learned from them that the university, as an institution, is a racialized and classed environment – in other words, a white, bourgeois institution. As a non-traditional student who came to academia relatively late in life, my students have helped revealed to me my own struggles with the ideology of the academy. Having grown up working poor and then dropped out of high school to play music, when I finally found my way to 2 top-ten universities in my 30's, I had to fight the recognition that higher education, especially a PHD in English, was not for

“people like me.” Of course, I found ways to navigate those choke points. But being white, male, cisgendered, and heterosexual helped.

In the twisted logic of this bill, *teaching* about race, gender, and class is tantamount to “attempt[ing] to influence” students. Again, in my 20-year teaching career, I have never told a student that their ideas or beliefs were not welcome in the classroom. This would go against everything I value about teaching and learning; the students and I create knowledge in the classroom. Furthermore, students come to university to encounter new ideas, to grow, and to change. If I thought the authors of this bill really believed that “reverse discrimination” was happening in the college classroom, then I would argue not only that they were wrong, but also that they were infantilizing the white male students they seem to want to protect. But it is quite clear that despite the sophisticated and coded language of the bill, the only people this bill is trying to protect are the corporations and moneyed interests that keep them in power; and if they must acquiesce to the Christian right to do so, they will. We’ve faced similar struggles before, in Weimar Germany and during the McCarthy era. This type of legislation does not happen in a vacuum. The attack on DEI and the no-strike clause in SB83 should be read as direct responses to the social unrest of 2020 surrounding the George Floyd uprisings and the intensification of labor movements across the county. These are interconnected phenomena, people responding directly to social and economic injustice and inequality.

Finally, let me reiterate that the people this will hurt the most are students and associated faculty, the former who will be denied the opportunities to see and understand themselves and the world in new ways, and the latter who work semester-to-semester on low-paying contracts. I am also deeply concerned about my colleagues in adjacent fields such as Black, Ethnic, and Women’s Studies. SB83, especially in its attempts to weaken the tenure system, represents a direct attack on academic freedom. There are real economic and social problems that need to be addressed by state government, including the overdose epidemic, the housing crisis, over-policing (especially in poor and Black neighborhoods), economic inequality, and environmental disaster. I urge the state senate to focus on these problems rather than this misguided, cynical, and frankly racist, legislation.

Sincerely,

D. B. Ruderman, PHD
Newark, Ohio.