

Testimony of Gregory Wilson, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 19, 2023

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

My name is Gregory Wilson, and I am a professor of history at the University of Akron, where I have taught for over 20 years. I do not represent the University of Akron, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

First, I firmly agree with Senator Cirino's statements that students need to study the good, the bad, and the ugly in our history, and that it is vital to teach our students how to think, analyze, and come to their own conclusions. While there are many aspects of this bill that are troubling, let me focus on how this bill will make it impossible to achieve our common goals of teaching all aspects of history and critical thinking needed to allow students to analyze and come to their own conclusions.

Unfortunately, there are internal contradictions in the bill relevant to courses I regularly teach, which include recent American history and Ohio history. In both courses we regularly work on documents such as the U.S. and the Ohio Constitution, and Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." By their nature, all these documents are controversial. The U.S. Constitution was, and remains, a document "subject to political controversy" both at the time and since. Any discussion of the amendments, for example, is grounded in controversy. The Ohio Constitution was also controversial; and at several points Ohioans lifted their voices to change it. King's letter from jail cannot be divorced from discussions that are controversial, including the civil rights movement, which focused on identifying oppression and segregation. Beyond these brief examples, this bill would prevent students from learning entire subjects, even those that the sponsors insist students need.

Critical thinking needed to enable students to draw their own conclusions is what I teach in my classroom. I do this through reading documents from a range of perspectives that already include those listed in this bill. Through writing and discussion, students encounter sources from the past and evaluate those sources, which include a multitude of voices that this bill would silence if it were to become law. This legislation would mean our collective failure for our students, our state, and our nation, as I would be unable to educate students with independent minds, nor the skills to be successful after graduation.

Knowing our past – even those aspects that make us uncomfortable – is something that, according to a recent survey conducted by Fairleigh Dickinson University and

the American Historical Association, three-quarters of Republicans and Democrats agree upon. There is overwhelming bipartisan support for history education, and the general public sees the education I provide and that my colleagues provide equally essential as professional programs.

Universities are essential to the maintenance of democracy. What our world needs now is a civil society that values universities and colleges for their ability to train students in independent analysis and critical thinking, while encountering the good, the bad, and the ugly in our past. These are the hallmarks of a free society, and universities and colleges are institutions that, as William Rainey Harper once said, are “born of the democratic spirit.” Sadly, this bill will crush that spirit.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this dangerous bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in written form.

Sincerely,

Gregory Wilson

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