

Testimony of Alex Wolf-Root, PhD
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
April 19th, 2023

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

My name is Alex Wolf-Root, and I am a Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at The Ohio State University. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

As an instructor and scholar I am deeply committed to rigorous academic inquiry, very much including inquiry that pushes back against generally accepted societal views. I regularly stress on my syllabi that “we are often going to be critical of the status quo [...] not because the status quo is necessarily wrong, but rather because only through such questioning can we reasonably hope to move closer to the truth.” I myself have some deeply held views that are poorly represented on campus, a couple to the point of being viewed as ridiculous by the majority. Despite all that, I fear that this big government overreach that is SB 83 will undermine, rather than support, the noble goal of expanding rigorous academic inquiry.

While there’s much wrong with this proposed governmental power grab, I want to focus on the idea of pushing political viewpoints. While supposedly in opposition to this, SB 83 is really an attempt by the government to promote governmentally preferred views on some highly contentious issues. The bill itself is in opposition to the restriction from Section 3345.0217 (B) (4) on attempting “to inculcate any social, political, or religious point of view” by restricting certain topics – topics that are socially, politically, and religiously charged – as acceptable for academic inquiry. On the flip side, the bill also explicitly states certain points of view that the government of Ohio deems acceptable in 3345.0217 (B) (6). I don’t know about you, but the government telling me what I can’t discuss and what I can promote sounds like the government inculcating certain social, political, and possibly religious views.

This governmental overreach into rigorous academic inquiry is especially worrisome once we see the vagueness of what will be acceptable or not. Section 3345.0217 (B) notes that some restrictions “do not apply to the exercise of professional judgement about whether to endorse the consensus or foundational beliefs of an academic discipline, unless the exercise is misused...” I don’t know about you, but it seems pretty worrisome to me to allow the government to pass a law saying that government bureaucrats – or even worse partisan politicians – get to determine if the person with the academic expertise to teach the course can share their expertise about what is the relevant consensus or foundational beliefs in their area of expertise. Some might even say it sounds down right un-American.

Beyond whatever others concerns others might have with this governmental power grab, it simply undermines the claimed goal of promoting robust academic inquiry about a wide range of issues. I strongly agree with this claimed goal and the need to question many things that many in society find problematic to question, but this bill does not do that. If you want big

government to tell the people what they can and can't research or teach, then SB 83 is for you. If you want free inquiry, SB 83 is not.

I urge you to oppose Senate Bill 83. Thank you for your time.