

Dr. Melissa McLaren testimony in Opposition to SB 83

To Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, my name is Dr. Melissa McLaren. I am a doctorally prepared nurse living in Ohio and working in higher education. I am writing to ask you to vote no on Senate Bill 83.

As a nurse of over 18 years, I have seen first-hand the negative impacts of social determinants of health. As a nurse working in higher education for eight years, I have also seen the impacts of social determinants of education. Both categories are heavily influenced by topics that would be curtailed by this bill because they would fall under the heading of DEI and the “controversial beliefs and policies.”

Race, racism and unconscious bias, which academic literature suggests contributes to social determinants of health disparities are uncomfortable topics. However, if nursing students aren’t aware of how these impact health conditions in under-served populations, then they will lack an important part of understanding why these health outcomes occur. They may not know why pregnant Black people have much higher rates of pre-eclampsia than pregnant white people. They may not know how race and racism have resulted in Black Americans having higher rates of high blood pressure, stroke, congestive heart failure, and so many other health conditions (Hall et al.,2015).

As nursing educators, faculty have to be able to talk about the impacts of unconscious bias in healthcare which can lead to wrong assumptions, wrong diagnoses, and negative outcomes for our patients. For example, even though we have extensive evidence regarding gender bias in heart health, women continue to be misdiagnosed or undertreated for cardiovascular disease (Desai, Munshi and Munshi, 2021). Faculty must be able to explore these topics with students to ensure all patients receive equitable nursing care. They must know to be aware of how unconscious bias has already harmed patients so they can be part of the solution instead of maintaining the status quo. The national licensure exam for nurses (NCLEX) includes questions on ethical and cultural awareness and Ohio students could be at a disadvantage when taking the exam that grants them licensure to be registered nurses. Many national nursing organizations such as the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), the American Nurses Association (ANA), the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) and many others have issued position statements on the need to include diversity, equity, and inclusion in nursing care.

Faculty must be aware of how race and racism impact a student’s access to higher education and how it can impact attainment of their degree. For example, in 2019, white Americans aged 29 or under were 55% more likely to have bachelor’s degrees than their Black peers. Over 80% of the nursing workforce is white and less than 20% are from minority backgrounds (AACN, 2023). Faculty must be able to talk about why these differences exist, why it is important, and how we can increase nursing degree attainment so that our nursing workforce looks like the patients they care for.

Discussions on race, racism, and diversity, equity, and inclusion are important in higher education. In healthcare education, those conversations can result in life-saving changes to how our healthcare workforce takes care of our patients. As the academic literature on this subject grows, so does the urgency in protecting the need to have these conversations in the classroom. Please do not pass Senate Bill 83.

References:

AACN 2023: <https://www.aacnnursing.org/news-information/fact-sheets/enhancing-diversity>

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S. Desai, A. Munshi, and D. Munshi (2021). 2021 Jan-Mar; 12(1): 8–15. Found at:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8189342/>