

Testimony of Christopher Phillips, Ph.D., John and Dorothy Hermanies Professor of American History,
The University of Cincinnati

Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 17, 2023

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

My name is Christopher Phillips, and I am the John and Dorothy Hermanies Professor of American History at The University of Cincinnati, where I have taught for 25 years. I am a Distinguished Research Professor in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities at my home institution, and was named the 2023 Distinguished Professor by the Ohio Academy of History. I do not represent The University of Cincinnati, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

I have read the testimony of supporters of this bill with interest. None is a historian or instructor of American history, the only discipline that this bill line-items. (One testimonialist, an adjunct scholar at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) who published his most recent books, claims himself an emeritus historian but his degrees are all in Economics and he taught his entire career in an Economics department; he further shares that his home institution would not allow him to teach History in retirement.) Collectively, the letters reflect what seem to me to be partisan, negative opinions of academics generally, reputedly for demanding a one-sided definition of diversity as a “campus disease” and for fostering an “echo chamber” of bias against conservative students.

None has been to my classroom to see how I present American history to students. I do teach nearly all of the topics that are specifically included in the bill and must be taught in a course on American history or government. In fact, I have never once in my entire career been accused of bias against any student because of their political beliefs or philosophies.

I do not support this bill, at least not in its entirety. Those mandates that require me to teach students well about their past in order to inform and understand the present, to encourage them to form and hold their own opinions, and to prepare them to participate vigorously in debates over the American past and present without fear of reprisal – in other words, to do exactly what historians I’ve known always have done - I fully support.

Most fully, I support the curricular mandate of a U.S. History class, on campus and face to face, as part of any degree conferred by an Ohio university. I disagree that equivalencies should be given for this mandate. Too many are given now. Advanced credit should not be offered at all to students entering an Ohio university, and especially not with such a low score on the AP test (currently a 3). There is no substitute for an actual History class taught by a trained historian with a Ph.D.

Particularly, I oppose the bill’s mandate D-7: “[No] individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” I do not support this because I condone such behavior by history instructors, but rather because I believe it is an unworkable prohibition. Uncomfortable topics will elicit strong opinions on both sides, and so this mandate will effectively replicate those passed in other states that prohibit the teaching of such topics.

Let me explain. Something over a year and a half ago, I wrote a four-page letter to our new provost about the ongoing controversy over public education and Critical Race Theory in Ohio and elsewhere. In an op-ed in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* on the same subject, I responded to one conservative policy advocate's comment that "Education is not above the fray; it is the fray" and that removing Confederate monuments is "erasing history." Teaching the history of the Confederacy cannot be done meaningfully without teaching racial history. Confederate monuments helped to accomplish a more persistent erasure: slavery and race's presence in the Civil War and on the American landscape. Teaching this subject will inevitably make both white and black students uncomfortable. To comply with this mandate would require that this subject NOT be taught at all.

If we cannot teach historical topics that might cause "discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex," we must not teach a raft of historical subjects: slavery, Black Laws, the Trail of Tears, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Plessy v. Ferguson, anti-immigration, the Great Migration, the KKK, the Chinese Exclusion Act, Executive Order No. 9066, movements for civil rights, women's rights, Chicano rights, and/or LGBTQ rights.

Historians are honor-bound to teach truthful lessons. That includes correctives, such as the history of Confederate monuments. Among our missions is to include positive and negative events often excluded from traditional understandings of American history, then to integrate them *alongside* rather than *in place of* cornerstone ideals of liberty, freedom and equality.

Not teaching these subjects risks perpetuating myths and misunderstandings about the past. This can have several negative consequences:

1. Limited understanding of the past. By avoiding uncomfortable topics, we limit our understanding of the past and our ability to learn from it. This can lead to a distorted view of history that ignores important aspects of our collective past.
2. Inaccurate portrayal of events. Avoiding uncomfortable topics can lead to an inaccurate portrayal of events. This can perpetuate myths and misunderstandings about the past, which can have negative consequences for our understanding of the present.
3. Limited critical thinking skills: Studying uncomfortable topics develops critical thinking skills by analyzing different perspectives and sources of information. By avoiding these topics, we limit our ability to think critically and make informed judgments about the past and the present.
4. Social injustice: Avoiding uncomfortable topics can perpetuate social injustice by ignoring the experiences of marginalized groups and ignoring the impact of historical events on present-day inequalities.
5. Missed opportunities for growth: By avoiding uncomfortable topics, we miss opportunities for growth and personal development. By confronting uncomfortable truths, we can develop greater empathy, understanding, and appreciation for the experiences of others.

Historians render informed, accurate assessments about our collective past. In the current period of misinformation, students are owed no less by the colleges and universities educating them not simply for jobs, but as citizens. The historians I know teach critical race fact, not theory. Avoiding uncomfortable historical topics can have negative consequences for our understanding of the past and the present. By confronting uncomfortable truths, we can develop a more nuanced and accurate understanding of history, which can help us create a more just and equitable society.