



The Department of Africana Studies Opposes Senate Bill 83 -Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act

Why Africana Studies Matter in Higher Education

The Department of Africana Studies at Kent State University strongly opposes Senate *Bill 83-Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act* that seeks to undermine academic freedom, workers' rights, diversity, and equity in higher education. Education has always been a “practice of freedom” for people of African descent who have had to fight for their right to liberty, dignity, and personhood - as autonomy beings with our own ideas, thoughts, and knowledge – in opposition to anti-Black racism arising from colonialism, imperialism, slavery, segregation, white supremacy, and systemic discrimination. Historically, African Americans have been subjected to state violence, and many sacrificed their lives in pursuit of racial equality and civil rights. The right to fair education has always been a part of our fight for justice. But different tyrannical tactics have been used throughout history to obstruct our path to knowledge and prosperity from belittling our intelligence, anti-literacy laws under slavery, literacy tests to vote to racial segregation in public schools. While there is no longer de facto desegregation in public schools in the post-Brown v. Board of Education era, integration and equal access to education have not erased efforts to suppress the democratization of public education at all levels to include all voices through the hegemony of politics, policies, and laws. Knowledge is power, so the current attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and non-Euro-American paradigms of knowledge in higher education are derived from a play book of the past. For some white Americans, there is a fear of empowering young people to think critically about their lives and the world around them because they might challenge the status-quo and reject white privilege.

We strongly oppose SB 83 because it seeks to undermine pivotal gains made as it relates to access and equity in higher education. Since the last millennia until the present time, Kent State University has worked, and continues to work, to break down barriers that impede access, academic success, and sense of belonging of under-represented populations who have been marginalized in public education, especially in Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). In 1947, Oscar Ritchie was appointed the first full-time member in the Department of Sociology at KSU, making him the first African American faculty member of a predominantly white state university in Ohio. Kent State University's Strategic Roadmap offers a student-centered approach to learning that includes academic excellence, diversity, equity, and community engagement rooted in an ethic of care and student empowerment. This is important in cultivating a sense of belonging whereby members seek to “build an inclusive community where everyone knows that they are valued.”

The Department of Africana Studies (AFS) occupies a unique space within the overall context of KSU's university-wide Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) strategic plan. The heightened civil rights activism of the 1960s led to Black student organizing against racism on campus (Black United Students) in 1968 which culminated in the creation of Institute of African American Affairs (IAAA) in 1969, the Center of Pan-African Culture (CPAC) in 1970 and the Department of Pan-African Studies in 1976 (now Africana Studies). The primary mission of our program has always been, and will continue to be, the personal and intellectual development of its students. It is important to add that our core mission regarding the intellectual development of our students and knowledge production as faculty members are grounded on the study and understanding of critical issues of race, racism, gender, social justice, their intersections with systems and institutions of power, and the general experiences of people of African descent and other marginalized groups.

WHAT WE OPPOSE IN SB 83:

The Attack on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)

Diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) is vital in higher education in fostering a fair, cooperative, and welcoming environment where all faculty and students can work, learn, thrive, and succeed. Senate Bill 83 is an anti-democratic piece of protest legislation that uses duplicitous language ("neutrality" and "intellectual diversity") to remove mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training that seek to bridge social and economic gaps in education that have stymied the progress of students, faculty, and staff from underrepresented groups, especially those of color. This bill also bans diversity statements on "hiring, promotion and admission decisions" so that institutions are not held accountable in promoting a more inclusive and just environment for all individuals to study and work in freely. There is not an equal playing field in academia for faculty and students of color, so this Bill seeks to impede institutional policies aimed at addressing discrimination, or as it is referred to in the bill, it "prohibits political and ideological litmus tests."

This sanction on DEI does not foster employment and learning efficacy for faculty and students of color who deal with prejudice, discrimination and belonging uncertainty in PWIs. Black students and other minoritized students are half as likely to access and complete college than their non-minoritized peers. They are also less likely to be encouraged to pursue programs that improve their career outcomes. Additionally, faculty of color already deal with racial stereotyping and their scholarship being negatively judged that often compromises their promotion chances. We strongly believe that SB 83 is not only discriminatory, but intentionally the bill undermines the core mission (academic and cultural) of what we do as a department. Systemic change is not possible without co-conspirators: people in the various offices within the institution who are willing to change their mindset to better themselves and others around them. There can be no genuine sense of belonging for minoritized faculty and if our collective voice is not heard and if we do not see ourselves reflected at all levels within the university community.

Scapegoating "Non-Traditional" Disciplines

Senate Bill 83 calls for "intellectual diversity" in higher education. On the surface, the term "intellectual diversity" seems progressive. The Bill states that: "Intellectual diversity means multiple, divergent, and opposing perspectives on an extensive range of public policy issues widely

discussed and debated in society at large, especially those perspectives that reflect the range of American opinion, but which are poorly represented on campus.” But with the gutting of DEI initiatives and different methods of academic surveillance, intellectual diversity, in this context, seems to have more to do with a grievance of superimposing the dominant worldview than about transformative academic work.

Under the veil of “intellectual diversity”, a select few people are dictating to academics how and what they should do. This is a fundamental intellectual assault on the basic principles of academic freedom that American institutions of higher education universities and academic departments are founded on, which is generating and sharing knowledge in different areas of thought. Senate Bill 83 is an existential attack on scholars in Africana/Black Studies, Latinx Studies and Ethnic Studies generally and other programs such as Women’s/Gender and LGBTQ Studies, because it specifically targets critical thought in these areas that are branded “controversial.” The Bill includes “climate change, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.” It also singles out specified concepts as ideologically and politically divisive such as “allyship, diversity, social justice, sustainability, systematic racism, gender identity, equity, or inclusion.”

While faculty are not banned from teaching and/or talking about these areas, the bill proposes a way on how you should teach your courses. SB 83 states that: “the institution must affirm and guarantee that faculty and staff shall allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial matters and shall not seek to inculcate any social, political, or religious point of view.” It is interesting that so-called controversial issues tend to be related to social justice issues, targeting faculty who teach and conduct research in these areas, who might choose to censor themselves in fear of retaliation by termination. Additionally, an *anything goes mentality* to academic inquiry seems to be reserved for anyone who can reject evidence-based research by substituting it with mere opinion or belief, which is unscientific and only amplifies the attempt of this Bill: to undermine the critical thought process embedded in the practice of teaching and learning in the Humanities and Social Sciences as well as it stifles liberatory ideas about today’s sociopolitical context that are seen as the threat to the status-quo.

Ignorance is being weaponized through crude relativism, false equivalences and the lack of ethics, for which instructors are expected to turn a blind eye to injustice. For instance, with this logic, teaching about slavery in the United States could possibly be reduced to some white folks thinking it was good to hold Black people in bondage as chattel while others felt it was bad, inviting so students make up their own minds. “Neutrality” in this case does not mean bias free. Without providing a critical analysis of the economic and racialized impacts of chattel slavery on the experiences of African Americans, it can mean the de-racing of American history. Different social identities examples can be plugged into this equation (e.g., gender identity/expression, and sexual orientation), yet, in the end, they all lead to fostering a climate of oppression in the teaching and learning experience for *all* faculty and students, with a disparate impact on minoritized populations. Oppression always seeks to reconfigure itself and it is doing so in this Bill. Higher education is not only about the pursuit of advanced knowledge, but it is also about personal development and fostering humanitarian values and civic responsibility in a safe and inclusive environment. Senate Bill 83 seeks to do otherwise so this why we are opposing it.

Tyranny at its Best: Violation of Academic Freedom and Worker Rights

Senate Bill 83 also seeks to violate academic freedom and privacy of faculty by applying internal and external surveillance methods to monitor compliance with “intellectual diversity.” If there is non-compliance, the Bill states, “each state institution of higher education shall implement a range of disciplinary sanctions for anyone under its jurisdiction who interferes with the intellectual diversity rights.” This compliance of “intellectual diversity” would be worked into student evaluations and faculty would have to post their syllabi every semester on the institution's website which is available to the general public. The biographical information of the instructor, the course description and recommended readings, among other items, must be included and the information will remain on the website no less than two years. All this information could be accessed by the public. This type of surveillance is not only oppressive to faculty members, but it is especially dangerous for faculty of color who are marginally represented in PWIs and/or those who deal with issues of race, racism and culture in their research, teaching and community work. Given the climate of racial profiling and violence against Black people and other minoritized populations, the proposed Bill will heighten the vulnerability of these groups. It should also be known that the best and brightest academics/scholars doing cutting-edge research on race, racism, gender, and social justice issues would not be attracted to our academic departments, Kent State, and other institutions of higher learning in the State of Ohio when this Bill is enacted into law. Additionally, this Bill is also anti-worker rights. It proposes stringent workload evaluations, post-tenure review and prohibits striking in any state institution of higher education. Faculty of color are already dealing with the glass ceiling and chilly climate issues in their institutions so the prohibitive measures in this Bill will only exacerbate existing academic, economic, and social disparities.

The Way Forward

The Department of Africana Studies staunchly opposes Senate Bill 83. Despite the rhetoric used in this Bill, it reflects an attack on academic freedom, free speech, and critical thinking. Furthermore, SB 83 is a direct attack on the focus of Africana Studies as it would curtail or severely restrict our ability to teach the history, social and psychological experiences of people of African descent. We are urging this body to see SB 83 for what it really is and to recognize that should it pass; it will send a message that the state of Ohio prefers to see itself as a state that embraces bigotry.

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