

Testimony of Katherine Borland, Ph.D., before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee.

Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 19, 2023

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

My name is Katherine Borland, and I am a Professor of Comparative Studies in the Humanities and Director of the Center for Folklore Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for 24 years, with a stint as Assistant Dean of the Newark Campus, 2006-2011. I do not represent The Ohio State University. Rather, I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

I am against this bill, as I believe it will substantially weaken the university system in Ohio, harming the state, its citizens, our economy and our cultural flourishing. I believe strongly that this bill will drive young Ohioans out of the state to seek education elsewhere; it will deter international students and students from other states from applying to Ohio universities, and it will prevent talented faculty and staff from working at our institutions. All features of this bill work to make our state legislators the arbiters of what counts as knowledge. This represents an enormous overreach in my opinion. Moreover, enforcing these new codes will establish a new level of bureaucracy into an already excessively bureaucratic structure, stifling innovation and excellence.

I want to focus on just one element of the bill, speaking in my capacity as an expert in humanistic pedagogy. The requirement that syllabi be posted outside of our education delivery system shells and be accessible to anyone within three clicks of a university's main page, violates the intellectual property rights of professors. How is the legislature going to prevent the unauthorized duplication, monetization, pilfering and potential distortion or misrepresentation of a professor's syllabi? Although professors are typically generous when it comes to sharing their ideas, materials and practices with peers, a market for successful course-plans and syllabi does exist outside of university settings. Our intellectual property can and will be poached if we are forced to publicly distribute materials that should only be accessible to students who are registered for a given course.

More important from a pedagogical perspective is the requirement for these "publicly facing" syllabi to describe the topics for class discussion. The requirement assumes a teacher-centered knowledge production model which is not appropriate for humanities courses. Courses in our fields are predominantly student-centered; they focus less on knowledge-delivery and more on developing the critical thinking capacities and written and oral expression of students. After all, we now have google search and Wikipedia for knowledge delivery. In the class on Global Folklore that I am currently teaching, students are active learners. *They* generate the questions that we take up in class, and the ensuing discussions work to broaden and deepen their understanding of the material by incorporating into their own readings the unique perspectives

and insights of other class participants. Advocates for the bill claim that they want to foster free and open discussion but seem not to understand how humanistic education actually works. In a humanities classroom we approach any text or situation as multilayered; its meaning is to-be-determined through shared inquiry as well as through comparison with other texts, synthesizing of arguments across texts, and so on. Classroom discussion is an emergent process, and students are likely to change their perspectives as they move through the course, so early discussions do not necessarily indicate final positions on the part of individual scholar-learners.

This discussion-based approach to learning, which has been a staple of humanistic education since Socrates hosted conversations with young Athenians, is also threatened by the proposed legislation's prohibition against discussing controversial topics. In my Global Folklore class students explore the unintended effects of global heritage regimes on cultural practices, objects and knowledge. We start from a position of thinking that UNESCO protection regimes are good for minoritized groups, but as we look at different cases, we learn that things are not always what they seem. We look at the ways social inequalities among other issues have affected people's ability to pursue what they consider to be "the good life." In fact, controversy is at the heart of every article we read. The point is to recognize multiple, conflicting perspectives about "tradition". If SB83 were to pass, not only would I no longer be able to teach this highly successful course, but I daresay my entire Comparative Studies Department as well as Humanities more broadly would be shut down.

For example, our recently revised General Education curriculum for undergraduate education regards the understanding of diversity, equity and inclusion as a foundational skill. All Comparative Studies in the Humanities courses fulfill this GE. Moreover, an undergraduate general education without a humanities core will yield graduates with technical skills perhaps, but students in Ohio universities will be robbed of the kind of intellectual preparation required of leaders in a complex and ever-changing world. I am at the end of my academic career, and so it will not be so hard for me to step away from actively cultivating our next generation of leaders, but others coming behind me must be afforded the autonomy to teach and learn with students in the ways that their professional formation has trained them. Your bill offers the antithesis of freedom of speech, thought, and inquiry. "Wokeness" is not an indoctrination tactic by humanities professors; it's a youthful perspective, born of lived experience in a rapidly changing world, that professors work to temper through our classes by fostering careful, respectful, intentional, inclusive dialog and discussion. Here I would refer you to the March 23, 2023 article by Megan Zahneis for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, discussing surveys on campus student self-censorship that point to students concerns about what other students may think or say, *not* professor indoctrination tactics as the cause of students' reluctance to voice opinions on controversial topics. In closing, I urge the members of this committee to visit my class, talk with my students, and witness firsthand how humanities education works before creating a bureaucratic apparatus that effectively dismantles free thought on campus.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this dangerous bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

