

18 April 2023

Dear Senators,

I am a faculty member at Kent State University, with 20+ years in higher education in Ohio and Virginia, and am deeply concerned about SB 83 and the unprecedented political interference and micromanagement that it would inflict on Ohio's colleges and universities. I ask that you do not support this legislation.

I believe that SB 83 proposes numerous grievous errors:

1. Having public officials dictating the content or curriculum of a university is not what happens in a free society. That is what governments do in Iran, China, and the former Soviet Union. Free people read books and debate ideas, openly and without a government "thumb on the scale."
2. My classroom is an open forum of ideas -- I invite any of you to visit me and my students there at any time. But it has taken me 11 years of higher education study, and 20+ years of teaching experience, to produce the syllabus and lectures that I deliver. The idea that a state politician or bureaucrat is equipped to either approve or audit my syllabus is ridiculous.
3. I teach design history, so as part of my curriculum I sometimes discuss horrifying events from the past. Of course my students today are not responsible for those events. It would be absurd to ask them to feel any personal "guilt" for decisions made before they were born. But it is equally absurd to ask them not to feel any "anguish" or "distress" staring into the face of the monstrous. No true history of humanity can be told without climbing across a mountain of bloodied bones. What righteous person's heart would not break, standing in its gargantuan shadow? Of course educated people must encounter "controversial concepts." That is the whole point.
4. Students form affinity groups to find friends and create community. This is a fundamental right of any free people, as is recognized in the Bill of Rights of the US Constitution -- Jewish students meet in Hillel. Catholic students gather in the Catholic student association. Gay students meet in the LGBTQ+ student association. Singing enthusiasts join the acapella choir. This is what free people do.
5. Discrimination based on race, religion, ethnicity, sex, veteran status, etc., is already illegal - thankfully - in the United States. If you Senator are concerned that discrimination in any form is taking place, that matter can and should be referred to the State Attorney General for prosecution under existing law. I would enthusiastically support this.

6. The last thing any State employee or organization needs is complex, time-consuming administrative mandates. These almost-always only generate lots of paperwork and get in the way of people doing their jobs.

7. China is an authoritarian country with whom the US is in a strategic economic and military competition. But China is also an ancient society that has produced some of humanity's most important cultural legacies in art, literature, philosophy, etc... The Chinese people are as complex as are US people -- some are kind, some are corrupt, some are visionary, some are greedy, some are violent, some are sensitive. Please do not be so arrogant as to think that we have nothing to learn from them, or their society. It would be intellectually and ethically crippling to prohibit study abroad programs in China. It would be intellectually and ethically crippling to disallow research collaborations between academics in search of truth. Surely it is simplistic to think that the only way to construct reasonable guardrails against legitimate concerns (like industrial espionage, exploitation, etc) is to demand a total ban.

8. SB 83 also undercuts my workplace rights by prohibiting my right to strike. I am a proud member of an American union, and note for the record the essential role that the US labor-movement has played in creating the economic conditions we Americans most cherish -- the 40 hour workweek, paid vacation & medical care, the minimum wage, the abolishment of child-labor, etc. Strong unions are a proud American tradition; weak unions weaken American society.

There are real problems in higher education that the people and government of Ohio needs to address: increased tuition, increased student debt, low student retention, and reductions in academic programs and full-time faculty. SB 83 gets at none of that, so is a regrettable distraction from the urgent work that needs to be tackled.

Respectfully, I ask that you reject this ill-considered bill.

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