

Testimony of Michelle Wibbelsman, Ph.D. and Associate Professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

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

My name is Michelle Wibbelsman, and I am a professor of Latin American Literatures and Cultures in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for the last 10 years. What attracted me to The Ohio State University was the vibrant intellectual culture at Ohio State as a Research 1 institution, undergraduate and graduate student research excellence, a thriving academic environment for interdisciplinary collaboration, the opportunity to play a role in educating future generations of scholars and leaders in all fields, and the value Ohio State places on community engagement beyond the university. I am opposed to SB 83 as I fear that all of the programming and values that make The Ohio State University one of the top institutions in the country and the world will be compromised by this bill.

My background is in Cultural Anthropology, Ethnomusicology and Latin American Studies. These inquiry-led fields center on comparative research and analysis across different cultures, bringing an array of methodological and theoretical perspectives to bear on my teaching and research. My area of specialization is on Indigenous communities of Latin America and the unique worldviews and practices they represent. My courses expose students to unique ways of thinking, of problem solving, of engaging societal issues that confront these populations, inciting students to think critically about diverse cultures and languages around the world and to consider their different practices and approaches to expression, creation, and participation in larger society.

I feel my students leave my classroom with an awareness of traditions beyond their respective cultures and more importantly with the curiosity and skills to formulate meaningful questions as a basis for discerning, informed, critical thinking. These skills are essential as students venture out into the world in their respective fields and professions, as they engage with peers at other universities across the United States and around the world. Beyond this, students in these upper-level topics-based courses develop their language skills in Spanish and are able to discuss complex topics in nuanced Spanish. This language skill and the high level of proficiency students develop at Ohio State gives them a real advantage in the workplace no matter what direction their professional lives lead them. This education which students consider a valuable part of their experience at Ohio State would be compromised by the sweeping ban on broadly defined “controversial” topics proposed by SB 83.

As part of my work at The Ohio State University, I direct a collection of Andean and Amazonian Indigenous art maintained by a group of graduate and undergraduate student researchers under my supervision. Student research with this collection has led to student publications, participation in conferences and research panels, and major events for our campus community and broader publics. It provides a space where students can refine their public speaking, teaching and research skills. This collection provides unique opportunities especially for undergraduate students in terms of mentoring, research collaborations, research scholarships, and their ability to participate in professional networks that are typically beyond the scope of undergraduate participation. Beyond Ohio State and Columbus, student research with this collection contributes to two national traveling exhibitions that circulate to other universities, reflecting back on undergraduate student research excellence as part of Ohio State's preeminent education. It is a way to have student work and engagement go beyond the bounds of the classroom and the university in ways that raise the profile of our institution among other universities across the country. This visibility and recognition of what we are accomplishing at Ohio State has drawn private donors to this initiative to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars. The research rigor and unhampered inquiry that leads to student work that reflects so positively on Ohio State's undergraduate and graduate student research excellence would be stifled, all out suppressed by SB 83 bans on DEI programming, discussions of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, and what proponents of the bill have termed "controversial" topics. Plus, we would lose tens of thousands of dollars in funding which would simply go to another less small-minded and more promising university.

This bill will cripple engagement with topics that are intrinsically tied to cutting-edge research and leading trends in academia and industry. More deplorably, it will have a chilling effect on freedom of expression and open discussion in the classroom in general. The effect will be devastating for our students for generations to come and their ability to assume leadership positions reliant on informed critical thinking and problem solving. The insular thinking this bill underwrites will render our students unprepared to be conversant with peers at other leading universities in the U.S. and around the world.

The muzzling of faculty by way of dictating both content and pedagogies in the classroom, and the proposed inflated bureaucratic oversight--ie. state vigilance supported through punitive measures will cause irreversible damage to our university's position as a top-ranking research and teaching institution. Senate Bill 83 demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of what faculty at an R1 do and how we maintain the national and international reputation of this institution. The bill will effectively make attracting and retaining top rated faculty difficult if not impossible.

The consequence for our students would be devastating. I fear that if faculty are not able to express ourselves freely and to model intellectual curiosity and passion for what we do, this will lead to an increasingly disengaged, disimpassioned generation of students. Innovation does not come from this place of disengagement. Leading research and learning, which require rigor and dedication, competitive funding support and institutional pride, do not come from an environment of suppression that fosters intellectual detachment, disinterest, and indifference.

Senate bill 83 undermines the commitment of this university and what we have worked hard to build in terms of a world-renowned faculty and student body that proudly represents the legacy of The Ohio State University and the State of Ohio.

For this and so many other damaging effects this bill would have on Higher Ed, I implore you to STOP SB 83.

Respectfully,

*Michelle Wibbelsman*

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