

April 18, 2023

**Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee,**

Thank you for allowing me to submit my written testimony today. My name is Balena Blaylock Shorter. I'm a mother of two Ohio collegiates. One attends Miami University and the other is a Buckeye at Ohio State University. In addition to being a proud mother, I'm also an active school board member and Vice President of the Fairfield City Schools Board of Education. I've lived in Fairfield Township, District 4, where Senator Lang presides for twenty-two years. I'm also a Senior Engineer in the aviation industry.

I stand in firm opposition to SB 83 and its companion bill in the Ohio House because it is, in my opinion, a careless means of enacting extreme partisan policies without the critical insight into the repercussions of those policies. Removing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs at our state universities is an overreach. These Republican sponsored bills such as SB 83 seem to have sprung forward from the efforts of Chris Rufo of the Manhattan Institute and others from traditional Right Wing think tanks. These approaches are misguided attempts to eliminate free speech and thought in higher education in order to posit conservative Intellectual Diversity. DEI programs in higher education are not infringing upon the growth of conservative thoughts and political leanings of young adults. Extreme actions such as attempting to eliminate programs that stress the importance of empathy are possibly the reason younger Americans may lean away from certain political persuasions. Creating a welcoming space is important for outreach. This is something all political parties should be aware of.

As an elected official in Ohio who has served on a school board for almost fourteen years, I can personally attest to the difference DEI programs can make in spaces where the population is becoming more diverse each year. It is vital for students K-12 and collegiates to understand how to navigate a changing world, and a changing workplace. Knowing how to relate to your peers in order to have smoother working relations is vital to fostering a more productive environment where all members feel valued and able to contribute fully. As a member of an under-represented group in STEM, I can speak from personal experience about the importance of DEI. It can be difficult at times when you are the minority represented in a space. Having a deeper understanding about people and what others bring to the table is critically important. Exposure to DEI concepts is truly a thing of value. It has helped me acquire valuable soft skills that are just as important as my technical know-how. Because of my lived experience and my understanding of Intersectionality, I'm more comfortable in spaces where I'm not the majority. Instead of banning discussions about Intersectionality and other concepts that lawmakers are deeming as divisive, these things should be discussed and explored. Our universities are perfect places for these conversations. Experts in these fields should help foster environments that are welcoming of all Intellectual Diversity.

It should be noted that eliminating DEI programs could have numerous unintended outcomes on our institutions of higher learning. Florida just recently removed language in their similar bill, SB 266, that called for the elimination of DEI in their institutions of higher learning. The language was removed because it was viewed as a potential threat to accreditation of some college courses and programs. This was done last Wednesday according to the Miami Herald. Even Floridian conservative politicians, where the Anti-CRT and Anti-DEI push has been exceptionally strong, paused when faced with the possibility of damaging their institutions.

Our institutions of higher learning should have DEI programs, trainings and personnel. There should be no attempts to eliminate them. They should be expanded because ALL students are valuable and should be in a climate that values them.

I humbly ask that you consider my testimony and refrain from eliminating DEI programs and departments in our state universities.

Sincerely,

*Balena Shorter*

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