

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Caleb Collins. I am a Myaamia heritage student from Miami University which sits in my traditional homelands. I am strongly opposed to Senate Bill 83 and its companion bill in the Ohio House.

I decided to go to school in Ohio so I could reconnect my family with the heritage that was taken away from us. I am a registered member of the Miami Tribe of Indiana which Miami University gets its name from. For many years the Myaamia lived and cultivated the land around Southern Ohio, parts of Indiana, and lower Michigan until we were forcibly removed to Kansas and then again to Miami, Oklahoma. Myaamiaki were herded at gunpoint and forced onto canal boats to begin their journey on October 6, 1846. Many were documented grabbing handfuls of soil when they left since they knew they'd never return. On the same day they were removed, classes were in session at Miami University as the boats passed through Butler County on the Miami-Erie Canal.

I never would have known about this history if I hadn't attended the Myaamia Heritage Program at Miami University. The Heritage Program provides a unique opportunity for tribal students and is the only program in the country that does this. It has provided a community for me that I never would have found at any other school in the country. My Aunt, Rachel Barber, attended the program and graduated in 2000 and my cousin Cole Bewick is currently attending with me as well. Many Myaamia students can say the same with cousins, siblings, or other relatives attending the program alongside them. There are currently 44 Myaamia students enrolled in the heritage program, and this number continues to grow each year as more of the community is making an effort to revitalize the culture we have lost. Many of them have no idea what it means to be Myaamia or native and are here for the same reason that I am. The Heritage program offers a tuition waiver to students who enroll, and the opportunity to fully participate in the revitalization and re-learning of our language, history, contemporary culture, and practices that define us. I am afraid that the passing of this bill would take this opportunity away from my tribe and other students who belong to other organizations or programs on campus.

The support I've received from the Heritage Program has allowed me to thrive as a student on Miami's campus. The resources it provides ensure that students can take every measure to learn as much about being Myaamia as they feel comfortable and succeed on campus. Every semester we have a meeting with Kara Strass, the head of student relations, who checks in with us to see how our semester is going. During my second year at Miami, she was able to refer me to student counseling when my mental health was preventing me from attending classes or completing my coursework. She also was able to direct me towards the resources available at the Rinella Learning Center where students can go for academic support in challenging classes. I was put in touch with an academic coach who helped me strategize how to pull my grades up and helped me get the tutoring that I needed. I wouldn't have passed my classes that semester if not for Kara's help and the support of my tribemates.

This program has also allowed me to attend tribal events on the reservation in Oklahoma which no one in my family has had the chance to do. I've been to three Winter Gatherings in my time enrolled in the program. Winter Gathering comes once a year in the last week of January and allows Myaamiaki from all over the country, and other tribes to gather and dance and be active in the community. We tell winter stories to the children and play games all day while enjoying each other's company. I've also been able to attend the summer youth camps which aim to teach culture and language to Myaamia youth for one week during the summer. I was a counselor for the Eewaansaapita program and was able to strengthen the Myaamia identity of my campers by playing traditional games with them like lacrosse and paaskoontia (native football) while supporting their learning of culture and language. I was hired to teach kids at this camp but ended up learning more about myself and what it means for me and my family to be Myaamia in the process. I was able to bring all that knowledge home during the summer and tell my family everything that I had learned. The Heritage Program provides opportunities like this outside of class for students to build our Myaamia community on campus. In the winter we have a group that goes maple sugaring and we hold lacrosse games outside of class in the springtime. Last year we also had a tour of our homelands that took students to locations in Indiana that were important to our ancestors and are talked about in the stories that they have passed down to us. I was able to visit my ancestor Meshingomesia's grave and pay respects to him. Without the Heritage Program, I wouldn't have had any of these opportunities which furthered my and many others' development as a Myaamiaki and a student.

Before the Miami Heritage Program, most tribe members hadn't heard of Miami University or knew that it sits in their homelands. Since the founding of the program in 1996 169 Myaamia students have attended the Heritage Program and 56% of attending students graduated before 2003. Since then the program has had a 92% graduation rate. This increase is largely attributed to the community that has been built around the program and the resources provided to students who need them. Some students don't need any of this and succeed on their own. However, a large portion of us, myself included, have relied on the Heritage Program to guide us through difficult times and help us succeed at Miami University. Without this program, many of us would have been lost. This bill would cut crucial programs out of our education system and leave a large portion of students without the resources and opportunities to succeed.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.