

Testimony of Tori Haller, Student and Future Teacher
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 19, 2023

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

Thank you, Senators, for granting me the opportunity for testimony to be heard regarding this bill. My name is Tori Haller. I am a student at The Ohio State University and a history major on the education track. I intend to teach history at the high school level once licensed. Due to this, I have a unique perspective on this issue because I have the fortune of seeing both the student and the educator sides of this issue.

SB83 threatens many of the democratic freedoms that characterize our institutions of higher education, chief among which is academic freedom. Academic freedom is a pillar of the democratic nature of these institutions, and though the bill claims to foster intellectual diversity, all it will do is quash it. One of a teacher's foremost duties to their students is to ensure that they receive a proper education. There is so much that teachers must learn about in order to properly ensure that *everyone's* child receives the education owed to them as a member of this nation. This has been ingrained in me from the moment I began taking education classes. As part of this education, teachers are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that students are well-educated on the current issues. However, SB83 prohibits institutions – and thus, its professors – from even

commenting on controversial beliefs and ideologies.¹ This prevents professors from teaching about controversial information in their classes, even if they are experts in that field.

Many of the best professors I have ever had were the ones who refused to shy away from controversial topics and leaned into them instead. I was never “indoctrinated” by these teachers or induced to believe what they did; indeed, these teachers sought to do the exact opposite. They presented the facts of history – even those that are historically overlooked – and encouraged critical discussion and consideration of these facts. By presenting diverse points of view, they allowed students to make personal connections and engaged them in critical thinking about course material. According to the About Page of OSU’s Office of Diversity and Inclusion, “[d]iversity enhances the learning experience by exposing and challenging us to consider, weigh and value the thoughts, experiences, and practices of others different from ourselves.”² The classes where I was presented with diverse points of view have always been the ones I loved the most; they have never failed to radically challenge and expand my worldview. To teach children *about* these issues is one of the very reasons I myself chose to pursue education. It is one of the most wonderful aspects of our democracy – the opportunity to come forward and have earnest discussion regarding issues that impact our society in order to better it. Senate Bill 83 claims to encourage intellectual diversity, but by prohibiting the discussion of any controversial issues, it prevents any of this democratic engagement from occurring.

If I – or any teacher or professor – cannot discuss the controversial issues that SB83 seeks to prohibit, how can we faithfully teach our students? And if teachers and professors are unable to genuinely do their jobs in Ohio, how will that affect Ohio’s ability to attract educational

¹ Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act, S. B. 83 Sec. 3345.0217(B6), 135th General Assembly. (2023).

² “About the Office of Diversity and Inclusion,” The Ohio State University: Office of Diversity and Inclusion, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://odi.osu.edu/about-office-diversity-and-inclusion>.

professionals? When I went home for Spring Break this semester, I discussed with my mother how the current state of educational politics greatly frightened me. Academic freedom in K-12 schools has been jeopardized by similar bills throughout the United States. As my family can attest, I have *always* maintained that Ohio is the home I intended to live, work, and die in. However, for the first time, I considered seeking employment outside of Ohio after I graduate – which is terrifying to me. I have never wanted to move anywhere else. My mother consoled me that day with the fact that higher education was still a haven for academic freedom if I chose to pursue my doctorate degree instead, which gave me some small comfort.

It was only the next week when I learned about Senate Bill 83, which continues this erosion of academic freedom – only this time, it was targeted at Ohio’s own institutions of higher education.

I am not the only one worried about the impacts of this bill on educators. A Cleveland news organization has reported worries regarding the negative effects of this bill on higher education in Ohio by discouraging promising instructors and students from attending our institutions of higher education.³ All of us here want the best education possible for our students, but by restricting what topics may be discussed and what professors may be hired, Senate Bill 83 endangers the quality and integrity of Ohio’s institutions of higher education.

Beyond ensuring that students receive a proper education, though, teachers are tasked with creating a safe environment for their students to learn in. These safe spaces are crucial to ensuring that students have the best chance to engage with the information that they are learning. As Drexel University’s website for its School of Education acknowledges, “... creating greater

³ Laura Hancock, “Critics wary of Ohio Senate higher-ed bill that would bar professors from striking, specify content of American history class, among other changes,” Cleveland.com, April 03, 2023, <https://www.cleveland.com/news/2023/03/critics-weary-of-ohio-senate-higher-ed-bill-that-would-bar-professors-from-striking-specify-content-of-american-history-class-among-other-changes.html>.

multicultural awareness and inclusion help students with different backgrounds and needs succeed.”⁴ Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs seek to do just that. For instance, they provide students spaces where they can meet with those that share a similar culture with them. The Latinx Student Association has been one such space of community and friendship for one of my very best friends. However, Senate Bill 83 threatens to take this community away from her in its prohibition of these so-called segregated spaces in extracurricular activities, among others.⁵ Furthermore, DEI initiatives like the Morill Scholarship Program also help to correct the legacies of mistreatment on those of said marginalized identities by offering bright, young, and dedicated students the life-changing opportunity that is higher education. Senate Bill 83 would also call into question the future of this program by prohibiting the conferring of “advantage” or “disadvantage” upon any students for their group identity.⁶ Programs like the Morill Scholarship Program do not seek to advantage one group over another; instead, it seeks to make the pursuit of education a more equitable process for all Americans. However, Senate Bill 83 does not recognize this. Instead, it would make the university a more unsafe place for these students. It tells these students that they are unwelcome. They deserve better from those called to represent them.

Senators... Chairman Cirino... Vice Chair Rulli... Ranking Member Ingram... Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee... I love my state. I have no desire to leave it. But this bill seeks to destroy many of the aspects of this state that I love. It will drive me, and other teachers and students, out of Ohio. However, it is not too late to change your minds and

⁴ “The Importance of Diversity & Multicultural Awareness in Education,” Drexel University: School of Education, accessed April 18, 2023, <https://drexel.edu/soe/resources/student-teaching/advice/importance-of-cultural-diversity-in-classroom/>.

⁵ Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act, S. B. 83 Sec. 3345.87(I), 135th General Assembly. (2023).

⁶ Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act, S. B. 83 Sec. 3345.87(B1), 135th General Assembly. (2023).

vote no on this bill. This bill – and the wellbeing of our professors, schools, and especially students – is in your hands. All of us, here, love this state. Let's work together make sure that all have the chance to enjoy the opportunities that Ohio's institutions of higher education have to offer.