

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 Richard Fletcher, I am a British-born US citizen, Ohio voter, associate professor at The Ohio State University in the Department of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy, and the proud parent of a child who attends the Columbus City Schools World Language Middle School, who I hope one day will attend one of Ohio's prestigious institutions of higher education. I am here today to offer my testimony in strong opposition to Senate Bill 83.

While there are many aspects of this proposed legislation that I find deeply concerning, and frankly unnecessary, I want to focus on its curricular implications for the future of higher education in Ohio, especially how the proposed mandated 3-credit American government or history course not only undermines the role of faculty governance for enacting rigorous curricular development, approval, and assessment, but also how the limited focus of its core readings fails to meet the requirements for a general education course that would prepare our students for a successful and shared future.

While I am testifying here as a private citizen, my decision to focus on the curricular matters in the Bill is informed by my ten plus years of work on the Curriculum Committee in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. This body and its panels of faculty members and staff (which also include members from beyond our College), enacts an impressively meticulous and rigorous process of curricular oversight – approving new and revised courses and degree programs. Furthermore, as a standing committee of the Arts & Sciences Faculty Senate, we are responsible for the approval and oversight of General Education requirements in our College and in an advisory role for the whole university.

From this perspective, there are robust structures in place for curricular development that make the proposed mandated 3-credit American history or government course an alarming overreach. Furthermore, with the limited nature of its required content (to read the Constitution, Declaration of Independence, essays from the Federalist Papers, the Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg Address and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's Letter from Birmingham Jail), without substantial expansion, I can assure you that any such course would fail to pass our curricular approval process. While an argument could be made for making selections from these readings a minimum requirement, setting them in full would be prohibitive for including additional readings that would reflect the full range of American life and experience.

In a public statement in *The Columbus Dispatch*, Chairman Cirino, you plainly stated that "The bill places NO restrictions or prohibitions on ANY curricula or classroom material." (emphasis your own). Yet this proposed course is remarkably restrictive and prohibitive. Trying to understand why the scope of this course is so limited, I turned to another context in which, Chairman Cirino, you discussed the Bill: the podcast *Saving Liberty*. During a candid conversation with the podcast's like-minded hosts, you mentioned your pride in your role as a Senator participating in the swearing in of new citizens. However,

in reference to them – us - taking the required citizenship test, you had read that only 40% of US citizens would pass. You then stated that: “Nobody should get a degree without knowing something about the civics of our nation – blemishes and everything.”

I heartily agree, although what the Bill decided to include as required texts *a* civics of our nation that is purposefully narrow. Furthermore, what you dub as ‘blemishes’, is dangerously dismissive of the diverse experiences of Americans today, especially those who have been historically and structurally underrepresented in the complex story of our nation. Beyond Dr. King’s letter, where are the required, core readings that would teach our students the full range of American experiences? For example, as Ranking Member Ingram asked in the first hearing of this Bill, why not require the Northwest Ordinance of 1785? But beyond the limited required readings, my deeper concern is that, beyond Dr. King’s letter, there are no required readings that center the experiences of those excluded by this Bill’s very narrow conception of who counts as an American.

For example, even if included, would the Northwest Ordinance, with its hollow rhetoric about guaranteeing Native occupancy and title, be used as a way for our students to understand why our state has no recognized Native American tribes? Or how this meant that a Land-Grant institution like The Ohio State University, founded through the Morrill Act of 1862, needed expropriated Indigenous land for its endowment to be generated elsewhere across the country and nowhere in Ohio? Or how historical and ongoing issues of Indigenous sovereignty, self-determination, and land-rights that owe a debt to the American Indian Movement in the late 1960s and 1970s are center the maintaining treaty rights? Happily, in recent years, I have witnessed important curricular work at our university, including in our General Education curriculum, that has been done to make sure our students – both settler and Native American alike - understand not only how our shared history still impacts us (albeit in importantly different ways), but also that it is through this process of learning we can create a responsible, shared future together.

As an Art Educator, I often find myself turning to artists, especially those artists who work towards the future in offering us insights that cannot be reached through other means. In a portfolio written for the magazine *Art in America* in October 2017, the Native American and mestizo artistic collective Postcommodity reacted to the 2012 census report that projected that by the year 2043 the US would be a minority majority nation. As a white man of European heritage, this is a future I want to embrace, not run away from, or pretend isn’t happening. One of the reasons for this can be explained by the vision and generosity of the following statement made by Postcommodity in their portfolio:

Perhaps the first step in building capacity is for us all to reject the interpretation of diverse cultural codes through the machinations of white Western chauvinisms and supremacy. An alternative possibility is for us all to move toward a connected-knowledge approach that emerges from building productive and mutually respectful relationship across worldviews. Productive diplomacy requires great compromises of all stakeholders for transformation to occur. Education in the United States can no longer afford to bear the legacy of the

Carlisle Indian School: “Kill the Indian, and Save the Man.” We must imagine a new future for education by leveraging the countless gifts of our many heritages to steward the earth.

It is this new future for education that the proposed 3-credit mandatory American history or government course, and the prohibitions and demands of the rest of the Bill, is bent on denying. At the same time, it is this new future for education that I see happening in the work of my colleagues in proposing curricula and the students in my classrooms. Furthermore, it is this new future for education that I want my son to eventually be a part of, ideally here in Ohio.

I will leave you with one more artwork, this time by Anna Tsouhlarakis, an artist of Navajo, Creek, and Greek heritage, whose *The Native Guide Project: Columbus* is currently on show at the Wexner Center for the Arts, both inside and outside the building, as well as in various locations in downtown Columbus. Using spare black text on a white background, Tsouhlarakis shares an inclusive and generous vision for Indigenous presence within a settler colonial institution like The Ohio State University, with phrases like:

IT’S TRUE, THERE WAS A VOICE BEFORE COLUMBUS

Or:

YOU’RE RIGHT, NATIVE AMERICANS HAVE DREAMS TOO

This Bill, with its regressive restrictions and demands on our curriculum that denies the whole story of our past, will deprive our students of being part of a future we can ALL dream of.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on Ohio Senate Bill 83.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

I am happy to take any questions you may have.

Respectfully submitted,

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