

Testimony of Molly Farrell, Ph.D.

Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 19, 2023

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

My name is Dr. Molly Farrell, and I am Associate Professor of English at the Ohio State University, where I have taught for thirteen years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

I was born in Columbus, and both my parents and most of my grandparents and great grandparents were too. My mom had wished she could go to her dream university but had to go to one that admitted women instead. Her dad, my grandfather, raised eleven kids on the Hilltop in Columbus as postal worker with only a sixth grade education until getting his G.E.D. late in life. I am the first person in my family to earn a Ph.D. Thinking of the doors shut in front of the family members who came before me, it is hard for me to put into words how much I value the freedom to access an honest, rigorous, unflinching, and wide-ranging college education. I have devoted my entire life to the pursuit of knowledge, of asking better questions, of learning in places I did not expect, and to understanding my world and my individual place in it, all while sharing the tools to embark and deepen that individual, unending lifelong journey with every student I am privileged to teach.

Since becoming a professor, and last year being voted English professor of the year by my students, I have taken to heart its foundational mission as “education for citizenship,” with citizenship defined in its broadest terms as being an active participant in our community. As a

scholar specializing in colonial American literature, I routinely teach the writings of founders of libraries and institutions of higher education like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, and I never forget their insistence on education as absolutely essential for sustaining a democracy where the people will rule themselves, instead of being told what to think. I teach the literature of the vibrant, violent, inspiring, and fascinating multiracial world they inhabited, exploring the intricacies of meter in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, the first African American to publish a book; and the strategic deployment of sentimentality in the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, who wrote a foundational abolitionist bestseller about his journey from enslavement to freedom. This past fall while poring through the manuscript archives in Thompson Library, a brilliant undergraduate student in my class who is nonbinary found themselves in the fragile well-worn pages of a recently acquired copy of a history of the Public Universal Friend, an eighteenth-century New England preacher who insisted on being seen as genderless. I myself have had “aha” moments like that while sifting through our nation’s great archival collections, and in a recent one I discovered and publicized a recipe for an herbal abortion that Benjamin Franklin chose to reprint in his 1748 math textbook. The stories of our past are as complex as our world today, and they are filled with all the topics that this Destruction of Higher Education Act seeks to suppress. They are filled with gender fluidity; they are filled with struggles for racial justice; they are filled with women seeking control over their bodies; they are filled with dreams of democracy; they are filled with everything that makes people from my grandfather to my students today hungry to learn and know more and find their own answers to the questions that keep them up at night and keep them going through the day.

By diminishing tenure you take away our freedom to seek and find our own answers; by banning controversial topics you take away everything that makes the freedom to learn

something generations have sought; by deciding in the statehouse what constitutes American history you slander the greatest unkept promise of our country, that all of us might be created equal and are equal in our ability to know our past so we can define our futures. My classrooms are places of respect for every single student to learn and explore and analyze and argue and think, every student who might show up there a conservative Catholic like I was as an undergraduate or a budding Black woman playwright like the great Adrienne Kennedy was when she came to Ohio State in the 1950s and was prevented from majoring in English because of her race. My classroom is a welcoming and invigorating space for everyone who wants to learn; the classroom this bill creates is a space that sows hostility, fear, and indoctrination.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this destructive and harmful bill. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.