

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 Ryan Skinner. I am an Associate Professor of Music and African American and African Studies at the Ohio State University. I am also the father of two aspiring Buckeyes, and I have called Ohio “home” for the past 13 years. I am strongly opposed to Senate Bill 83 and its companion bill in the House. This legislation gets a lot wrong, and some of the mistakes risk grievous consequence.

First, the language of state-sponsored “prohibitions” and “mandates” in higher education should give us all pause, not least those among us who might hold conservative principles of governance. When the state legislature speaks of banning programs and mandating curriculum, we have entered the dangerous territory of ideologically motivated government overreach.

The integrity and reputation of our institutions of higher education rest upon our independence and ability to govern ourselves, develop and assess curriculum, and teach students as we, credentialed professionals within the academy, deem proper and appropriate. It is both highly inappropriate and gravely harmful for the Ohio state legislature to intervene so profoundly in these activities, as this bill proposes. Indeed, the myriad mandates, prohibitions, and changes to university governance, faculty teaching, and assessment would result in the very thing this bill so stridently opposes: the imprint, written into law, of partisan, ideological interest on our higher education system in Ohio. Such an outcome, whether intended or not, should not be entertained by this committee.

Let me specifically address one of the many bêtes noires in this bill: The prohibitive attack on diversity, equity, and inclusion, or “DEI.” This bill impugns DEI programming and related associational life on the grounds that such work and forms of affinity are either “controversial” or otherwise harmful to the institution and the community it encompasses. But there is nothing controversial about social and cultural pluralism. These are clear and present realities of the society in which we live!

Further, the stated harms that DEI prohibition suggests are misguided. DEI initiatives do not advantage or disadvantage people, nor do they segregate our communities. Just the opposite. DEI programming, including faculty trainings, and associational life, including student groups, exist to ensure that everyone (students, faculty, administration, and staff) may live, grow, learn, work, and ultimately thrive in our institutions. DEI initiatives emerge from the simple, but vital recognition that we are, in fact, variously different, and that there is value in embracing and nurturing such difference within community.

Identity-based groups, such as Jewish, Muslim, or Christian associations, clubs highlighting African, Latin American, or South Asian cultures, or forums sponsored by minority communities more generally are not “segregated” from the university; they are the organizational bedrock of civil society at our institutions. The activities and events such groups organize make profound, daily contributions to our public sphere. They are spaces for outreach and engagement; they foster learning and dialogue; they challenge assumptions and encourage inquiry; and, by highlighting various social and cultural lifeways within our society, they serve to foster and sustain relationships—the exact opposite of segregation.

I ask that you consider my testimony and vote NO on this misguided and harmful bill. Thank you again for this opportunity to testify. I am happy to take any questions you may have