

Testimony of Amy Sullivan, PhD
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

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

My name is Amy Sullivan, and I am a professor of Biology at Miami University. I do not represent Miami University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83. I am proud to call Ohio home and to teach at one of our many amazing universities. I am taking the time to write this testimony today because I am concerned about the way SB 83 would change higher education in Ohio. There are many things that concern me in this proposed legislation, but I will focus on 3 of them: DEI initiatives, the vague definition of intellectual diversity, and the workload required to implement this legislation.

DEI

We tend to associate with those who are like us, with whom we share interests, geographic location, culture, and community. For many, college is the first place where we are introduced to people who are different from us, who come from different backgrounds and communities, who face different challenges, who have different ways of thinking. It is important for all people to recognize that these differences exist and to gain competence in understanding and interfacing with people from a variety of backgrounds. DEI trainings and initiatives, while not perfect, are incredibly helpful in this regard. I participated in one a couple of years ago and was surprised to take away new perspectives and skills that helped me be more empathetic and supportive of people who are different from me. I believe these trainings are useful in helping to build a strong and empathetic university community.

These DEI trainings and initiatives are also important for students as they move into the workforce. Companies are increasingly focusing on fostering diversity and implementing DEI initiatives in the workplace. As such, it is incumbent upon the State of Ohio and its institutions of higher education to prepare graduates to go into the professional world with an understanding of what diversity, equity, and inclusion are, and how to interface with and treat others well. Additionally, several accrediting agencies for higher education require DEI initiatives. Removing DEI would affect accreditation, which would impact the value of degrees from Ohio colleges and universities, which would negatively impact our graduate's ability to enter the workforce.

Intellectual diversity

There are likely to be a lot of confusion and unintended consequences to legislating something like intellectual diversity. For one thing, the term means different things to different

people, even with the definition given in the legislation. For example, the legislation specifically cites climate change as a controversial belief, though in reality it is a well accepted and understood phenomenon. What would intellectual diversity surrounding climate change look like in my biology class? To me, intellectual diversity would focus on a variety of ideas about how we slow and mitigate climate change. To someone who doesn't believe in the science of climate change, intellectual diversity would be focused on whether it is happening or not, or perhaps whether it is human-caused or not. Which of these would actually be intellectual diversity? Who decides?

Further, if a student in a biology course doesn't believe in a core scientific concept, can they cite intellectual diversity and demand not to be required to learn the concept? If a student's intellectually diverse perspective includes racist, sexist, or otherwise hateful or ignorant rhetoric, is the instructor allowed to respond to and correct them, or do they have to let those ideas stand in the name of intellectual diversity?

As an example from another field, would economics classes have to include communism and socialism as economic models in the name of intellectual diversity, since those are systems that are reflected in the range of American opinion? Would business classes have to teach the benefits of unions, since that is also reflected in the opinions of many Americans?

Students are already exposed to a diversity of ideas through the variety of classes they take and the people they interact with. Some ideas are more liberal-leaning, some are more conservative, but all of them provide opportunities for students to reflect and think critically about their own worldview and what they choose to incorporate into it. Legislating intellectual diversity is not the answer – the vague definition of intellectual diversity and the question of who ultimately decides what it is and how it is enforced are all problematic.

Workload

Lastly, I am concerned about what this legislation means for my workload. I teach between 21-24 credit hours each school year (9 months). I think many people do not understand everything that goes into teaching. In addition to the actual time spent teaching, it requires prepping for class to make sure lectures and activities are current and ready, writing assignments and exams, grading all of the work, and answering student emails. All of this takes me more than 40 hours a week. On top of teaching, I have service requirements as part of my job that add at least another 10 hours each week. I regularly work evenings and weekends to get everything done. This legislation would require me to create summaries for each of my lectures, adding more to my own workload, which is already too high. Additionally, it would require hiring more administrators to make sure syllabi, summaries, student evaluations, speakers and honoraria, etc. get posted and updated.

I've only touched on three problematic issues with this legislation; there are many more. I urge the committee to fully consider the ramifications of this legislation for Ohio higher education, its reputation, workers, and most importantly, students. This bill is deeply problematic and should not be moved out of committee. Thank you for your time.