

Testimony of Andrea Sosa Fontaine, MID, NCIDQ, IDEC  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair  
April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023

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

My name is Andrea Sosa Fontaine, and I am a Professor of Interior Design at the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State University, where I have taught for three years. I do not represent Kent State University, but rather am submitting testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 83, as a resident of Ohio, mother of children in Ohio, and post-secondary educator.

While SB83 is presented in a manner with intentions to diversify voices in higher education within Ohio, the language of the bill is problematic, and clearly harmful to the integrity of academic freedom. SB83 presents an exclusionary approach to higher education, limiting both what and how we teach.

In my own experience, I accepted an offer at Kent State University, and relocated my family to Ohio, in part, because I felt that the institution was able to foster an equitable and welcoming learning environment, while at the same time making space for professors to pursue innovative research. At the time of accepting the offer, I had multiple offers from other public higher ed institutions throughout this country, including offers in Georgia, Illinois, and California. I believed that Ohio, and in particular, Kent State University, would allow me to most effectively teach and research within my discipline. The passing of SB83 would significantly limit my ability to teach students current discourse and continue my research pursuits with rigor.

SB83 would result in a number of our most accomplished faculty seeking new positions outside of Ohio and would also reduce the quality of applicants for future academic positions. As the birthplace of aviation, Ohio is known to foster innovation, however the passing of SB83 would limit our ability to innovate within public higher ed institutions.

As an educator at Kent State University, I can attest that both myself, and my colleagues already strive to create a safe space within our classrooms where students are free to express themselves and discuss their views on complex issues without fear of retribution. Our students have acknowledged that they feel safe expressing their opinions, as seen in our student course evaluations, and a strong sense of student belonging within our institution. Student organizations based on race, gender identity, or sexual orientation, are critical in fostering a sense of belonging. Numerous research studies from public higher ed institutions throughout the United States have indicated that the ability for students to form organizations based on race, gender identity and sexual orientation are critical to contributing to their academic success and mental wellbeing. It would be a mistake to disallow these organizations within our academic institutions.

In Ohio, we have a very diverse population, and SB 83 delegitimizes the impact of racism, forced displacement of indigenous people, and continued discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. This is not a matter of opinion but supported by fact and the history of this country. To support diversity in higher education, it is critical that we do not exclude portions of history or social context that are critical to disciplinary understanding, and student belonging.

This intrusion of government on academic discourse, and level of micromanagement will prevent educators and institutions from focusing on teaching our students and undertaking innovative research.

Unfortunately, there aren't any aspects of SB 83 that are salvageable, as it is a clear demonstration of political agenda interfering with the integrity of public higher education. The bill perpetuates racism, impacts academic freedom, limits workers' rights, discriminates against students and limits innovative research. As a professor in the state of Ohio, I strongly oppose SB83 in its entirety.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AS2' with a stylized flourish at the end.

Andrea Sosa Fontaine

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Kent State University