

Testimony of Renee Heberle, Professor of Political Science

University of Toledo  
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:

I testify here in opposition to Senate Bill 83. I am a professor of Political Science and co-director of an interdisciplinary major, Law and Social Thought, at the University of Toledo. I have been teaching at UT since 1997. I have flourished, as have my students, in the environment of academic freedom and independent thought, which, up until the introduction of this bill, appeared more or less secure in the state of Ohio.

Public institutions of higher education are not “state run” like agencies that implement laws and policies. They are **publicly supported independent institutions**. They require independence from the state (and from elected legislators) because their mission is to discern and create knowledge necessary for democracy to thrive. Put another way, with respect to curriculum and research, and to some degree administrative action, publicly supported institutions of higher education **require** independence from the preferences of those elected to state office. This bill would undo the terms on which publicly funded institutions of higher education have historically sought out truths and facts beyond what elected politicians or public opinion think to be the case **and** challenged the status quo (whether that status quo be political, scientific, social, or otherwise). It is this mission of independent institutions of higher education that contributes to the sustenance of a dynamic and flourishing democracy.

SB 83 strips publicly funded institutions of higher education of the independence that is central to their mission. It goes so far as to legislate the requirement and content for a course in American Government **Sec. 3345.382**. Notwithstanding that we already teach those materials in that class and other classes, to legislate the requirement and content, is a violation of academic freedom and the autonomy that has allowed public universities and colleges to do the work of democratic inquiry. The intent of the requirement as written in the legislation is to flag-wave, not to educate or critically analyze the documents, the historical situation in which they emerged, or the outcomes for the complex plurality of persons impacted. But it does not matter whether the legislators proposing such curricular material are left or right wing, Democratic or Republican, Socialist or Libertarian, it is an authoritarian move on the part of the Ohio legislature, making Ohio no better than Russia in its determination to govern what its subjects are to learn even after they reach the age of majority.

Other authoritarian tendencies in the bill are only slightly less obvious when it comes to the teaching and research that happens on public university campuses. Demanding obeisance to “intellectual

diversity” sec. 3345.0217 suggests teachers on university campuses must constantly second guess whether they are representing “views not well represented on campus.” Teaching and research is not governed by public opinion or majority/minority ideological beliefs. It is driven by research and scholarship that is contested and argued over by academic communities whose endeavors stretch over millennia and across the globe. Every “definition” listed in this section of SB 83 is ripped from the headlines of the culture wars, meaning they are inspired by the current moment in terms of what is “controversial” or may “reflect the range of American opinion.” If this bill passes, another kind of legislature may be voted in with an entirely new set of rules about what and how we should teach and research on publicly supported campuses. We will no longer be teaching or researching as independent scholars; we will be propagandizing for the current regime.

I teach courses about political theory and feminist theory. I also teach courses about the relationship between law and politics, about gender and politics, about the politics of violence, and the politics of punishment. If SB 83 passes I will continue to teach exactly as I have always done since I do not “inculcate” (sec 3345.0217) anything; rather, given the time limit of 15-16 weeks, I represent a range of scholarship relevant to the areas in which I teach. I teach **about** ideas and issues and policies. The word ***about*** is important. I don’t know the truth about anything I am teaching. The classroom is a place to think and learn **about** things, to seek truth, not to establish it.

What will change if SB 83 passes is that I will be subjected to judgements not about whether students are learning and advancing their critical thinking skills in my classes, but about whether I am “representing the range of views of Americans” and/or mirroring the individual students’ views themselves. If I engage critically with what a student says I will be thinking about whether they think I disagree and will therefore punish them. The message being sent by this legislation is that classroom discussion is merely about agreeing or disagreeing, that it is a potentially punitive space for those who dissent from what the teacher wants them to think. That message is simply bait in the culture wars. It has nothing to do with what is happening in classrooms. Proponents of this legislation cannot offer any more than the occasional anecdote as evidence that teachers are “inculcating” anything in classrooms.

I will reassure myself by reminding myself that students are not stupid. If I were “inculcating” perspectives about anything I teach, my professional life would be easier. I would not be working so hard, 30 years in, to help students learn to engage with complicated texts and ideas on their own terms. Perhaps I would run for office (I’ve always been tempted) rather than engaging with students about ideas and issues and policies in the classroom. In my classes, students engage, using their views and any other resources they bring to the table, with the vast range of scholarship and research with which they are presented. That is how I teach and how I will continue to teach. But if SB 83 passes I will be doing it under an authoritarian regime that lays out vague requirements for content that matches a certain ideological sensibility and uses double-speak to communicate its demands. I don’t care if that regime is right or left leaning. At the moment it is right leaning. Either way this kind of legislation saps the independence publicly funded universities require to do their work as universities.

Thank you.

