

Testimony of Sara Watson, Ph.D.  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair  
April 19th, 2023

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

My name is Sara Watson, and I am an associate professor of political science at The Ohio State University. I do not represent OSU, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in strong opposition to Senate Bill 83.

SB 83 covers vast terrain, including issues as varied as the right to strike, tenure protections, “bias” in the classroom, mandatory DEI trainings, partnerships with Chinese institutions, and mandatory coursework/reading in American government and history, among others. In today’s testimony, I’m sure you will hear from opponents on most, if not all, of these areas. However, I wish to focus my comments on two contradictory components of SB 83: its *rhetorical* emphasis on ensuring intellectual diversity on university campuses and its *actual* provisions, which would stifle intellectual diversity.

According to SB 83, “No state institution shall hire any administrator, teacher, staff member, or employee to provide instruction” on one of nine divisive “concepts” relating to race, sex and gender identity. As a professor in the social sciences, I find this portion of the bill deeply alarming. I teach classes in comparative political economy and public policy. As written, SB 83 would prohibit instructors like me from covering material on the foundational events of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century history—for example, about the rise of fascism and national socialism; about colonial legacies; or even about debates over the extension of women’s suffrage. Why? Because teaching this subject matter necessarily involves asking students to engage with the idea—advanced by historical actors—that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.” It might also run afoul of the laws’ prohibition on discussing the idea that “an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of the individual’s race.”

There is of course a vast difference between an instructor teaching *about* an idea and asking students to actively *embrace* such ideas. But SB 83 – with its sloppy, vague language—does not attempt to distinguish between those situations. Instead, it would subject higher education instructors to disciplinary action should they be found to have taught one of these “divisive concepts”—and asks Ohio universities to create a vast bureaucracy aimed at investigating and sanctioning instructors’ alleged efforts to “inculcate” students. Talk about government over-reach!

Let’s be clear. Far from protecting intellectual diversity and eliminating “bias” in college classrooms, S.B. 83 represents a blatant effort to restrict the free exchange of ideas on Ohio campuses. It threatens to censor students’ ability to critically engage with competing perspectives by restricting instructor speech. The bill’s sponsor, Senator Jerry Cirino, effectively

acknowledged this in a recent *Columbus Dispatch* op-ed, when he referenced “woke ideology” and “woke fiefdoms” in Ohio universities as justification for this bill. Senator Cirino seems to believe that indoctrination permeates teaching and learning at Ohio public colleges and universities.

This is simply not the case. Rather than embrace this law, Ohio lawmakers should be asking: How can Ohio universities effectively “equip students with the intellectual skills they need to reach their own, informed conclusions on matters of social and political importance” (as SB 83 exhorts) if they are required to excise important discussions around race and gender from the very classes that they teach?

The sad reality is that SB 83 threatens Ohio universities' proud history of promoting engaged citizenship through open debate and deliberation. I urge the members of this Committee to stand up for true intellectual diversity -- and to resoundingly reject Senate Bill 83.