

10 April 2023

Dear Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony in response to the Ohio Senate Bill 83. My name is Anna Cunningham and I am a student at The Ohio State University in the College of Social Work. I am writing this because I am incredibly proud and happy to be at a university that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion. It would be devastating for that to change.

At The Ohio State University we do not fear diversity. Prioritizing equity and inclusion builds our school community and makes us stronger. We welcome people of all races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, backgrounds, and abilities because creating a place where people feel safe and accepted is crucial for education. When a student feels unsafe and unwelcome because of their ascribed identity, they are unable to learn because they are too distracted, stressed, or scared. Every student in Ohio deserves the right to learn in a comfortable environment that does not censor who they are as a person.

In the College of Social Work we encourage conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. As future social workers, students want to understand historic and modern injustices in order to improve our society for everyone. We know some things are uncomfortable to learn, but that is not a reason to avoid or ignore that topic. We need to learn even the most shameful parts of American history in order to not repeat the tragedies of the past and ensure this country remains on a progressive track. Section 3345.0217 of The Enact Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act forbids discussions on any “controversial belief or policy.” This rule would be a direct disservice to students, as it censors our beliefs and ideas that are supposed to be protected by our First Amendment right. “Controversial” is a vague and relative term that could include an endless amount of topics. I want my professors to raise controversial questions. I want my peers to say controversial opinions. I want controversy because we learn from controversy. Instead of fearing controversy, let us embrace it. Let us grow and spread ideas that rise from controversies because there is no shame in admitting our country has room for improvement. But it will never improve if we prevent students from thinking critically and striving to be the best. I do not know what would be left of the College of Social Work if this bill was passed and diversity, equity, and inclusion discussions become prohibited.

As a white person, I am perfectly comfortable learning about race and any race-related topics. I enjoy conversations about race because those conversations expand my point of view and help me contextualize the world we live in. Learning about systemic racism does not make me upset about the color of my skin; it makes me feel powerful knowing I can help people fight discriminative policies and help build a system that provides equal opportunities, not just theoretically, but genuinely. Learning about segregation does not make me ashamed; it makes me focused on strategies and reparations to address past injustices and prevent repetition of injustice. Learning about oppressed groups and their oppressors does not make me feel guilty; it allows me to understand how inequality has been maintained, and therefore how it can be reduced today. Professors and college students are adults; we can make decisions for ourselves regarding what is appropriate and necessary for us to learn. Our education does not need to be reduced or limited based on the perceived discomfort of certain students. Some topics can seem uncomfortable at first, but OSU students are open-minded, ready to learn, and brave. Not only can we handle an uncomfortable lesson, but we have the ability turn that discomfort into growth, power, and drive.

Diversity is a source of joy for me and many others at OSU. Senate Bill 83 would take away our Morrill Scholarship Program, reducing many students' access to financial aid and preventing them from building a community here. If we "prohibit all policies designed explicitly to segregate faculty, staff, or students by group identities such as race, sex, gender identity," as Senate Bill 83 states, then we would not be allowed to have any girl's intramural sports teams. I have made amazing friends through the Girls' Lifting Organization, and would be distraught to see this supportive organization be disbanded. Prohibiting mandatory training for diversity, equity, and inclusion would instantly make campus a less safe place for students of color, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ students. As a queer woman, I feel safer and happier on campus knowing my peers have an awareness for different identities. Diversity training helps queer students know they are protected, valued, and included. Diversity training teaches non-queer students how to respect, understand, and support their peers. There are no downsides to diversity training, but prohibiting it will cause harm. This work of fighting social justice is life-saving to me. Let students and educators save lives and experience happiness through diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I appreciate your acknowledgement of my point of view and I hope you all can understand how upsetting it would be to us students if this bill were passed. I urge you to vote against this bill. Please vote for education and joy, not censorship and fear.

Sincerely,
Anna M. Cunningham