

Written Testimony Opposing SB83

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By Robert W. Pfaff, PhD

Members of the Committee,

My name is Dr. Robert Pfaff, and I am currently a visiting assistant professor Cleveland State University. As an instructor who holds both a PhD and master's degree, with nearly a decade of training in pedagogy and research, I am deeply concerned about SB 83's unprecedented political interference into classroom instruction and deliberate stifling of academic freedom for students and faculty that masquerades as intellectual diversity and freedom. This bill is dangerous for the educational outcomes in our beloved state, and it would result in a tangible regression in Ohio's colleges, universities, and educated populations. I strongly urge you to not support this legislation.

While there are many issues in the bill as written, I want to draw your attention to how this may negatively impact professional degree programs as one major drawback. I believe provisions that prevent discussion of certain topics, or mandate teaching a set curricula of readings, will result in a revocation of accreditation for professional degree programs like the one I teach in for Urban Planning and Development. We maintain accreditation for our graduate students through a national body of practitioners. Our core courses, and the core content, are aligned with national accreditation standards that address the needs of both graduates and employers to address pressing urban problems, and allow for urban planners to apply a universal set of skills and knowledge to any geography in the US.

Our standards explicitly require us to speak about race, inequality, and historical mistakes of the profession. This is done not to make students experience discomfort or guilty, but in the spirit of mutual understanding. We must learn about the mistakes of our past in order to move forward, and avoid them in the future. In the case of urban planning, there have been significant instances of extreme racial prejudice that resulted in systematic disenfranchisement, disinvestment, and demolition for communities of color – namely urban renewal, redlining, and federal highway construction. If SB83's provisions that effectively muzzle professors about these topics goes into effect, we run the risk of losing our national accreditation by being prohibited from teaching these topics, and may not certify practitioners to research in Ohio's 2nd largest city.

A removal of a professional degree, per the language of SB83 as written, will ultimately steer students away from our program, away from Cleveland, and away from the State of Ohio. This will accelerate the "brain drain" of workers moving out of Ohio, and may occur at a rate above replacement, meaning we will not be able to educate new cohorts fast enough.

This has significant impacts in the State of Ohio, as well as the greater Midwest. Cleveland State is 1 of only 3 accredited programs in Ohio for Urban Planning, and 1 of 15 in the Midwest.

SB83's provision against diversity teaching may result in 1/5th of the accredited programs in the Midwest being removed, and a significant loss in students and tuition dollars in those programs and pipelines. In just a Cleveland-specific example, this will ultimately trickle down to hamper municipal hiring in Cuyahoga County, which currently relies upon a steady pipeline of employees to tackle issues of the rustbelt city at the local Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), City Planning agency, County Planning Agency, and a host of smaller private and public orgs (transportation, water, Community Development Corporations, etc.) that serve the public. Levin School graduates are well recognized within Cuyahoga County and across the state, and hold prominent positions in mayor's offices, county seats, boards, and offices both public and private. Threatening this with SB83's provisions that will run afoul of national accreditation is tantamount to significant regression in our civil capacities as a democracy.

This bill also impacts potential resources and funding secured by faculty to conduct research. I currently serve as co-investigator for a five-year, \$1.5 million dollar US Department of Transportation (US DOT) research grant to study and expand transportation access for low-density and rural communities to reach workforce training and job centers. These funds represent a significant investment in talent and research expertise for under-resourced communities, but are put in jeopardy if faculty on the grant cannot openly discuss the issues of equity as required by the US DOT metrics for the purpose of this work. The provisions of the bill SB83s prevention against diversity or identity issues will limit the scope of research and study able to be completed university faculty and students.

If enacted, SB83's strict provisions would ultimately negatively impact all public planning bodies in the State of Ohio. I present this information about one glaring issue with the bill that will have a stark and identifiably negative impact on our institutions, and strongly urge you to reject the bill. Although I do not speak for other disciplines, I'm sure this issue is also present in other professional certificates with strong racial ethics components for practice, especially in psychology, law, engineering, nursing, and education to name a few. Based on this information, I submit that SB83 will endanger programs that train and attract professional practitioners who current serve the public in a variety of roles across the state, and strongly urge you to reject SB83.

Warm Regards,
Robert W. Pfaff, Ph.D.