

Testimony of Josh Scheidler, MA
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
April 18, 2023

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

My name is Josh, and I am a doctoral student of Composition and Rhetoric at Miami University where I have been for a year. I do not represent Miami University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83. I believe the bill not only unfairly represents higher education, but it underscores a significant misunderstanding or even miscommunication about the values of academics and the ideals espoused by them. To be clear, I believe this bill will stifle rigor and it will harm the concepts of academic freedom and intellectual diversity.

The bill seeks to “create a classroom atmosphere free of bias,” but what does that mean? Are teachers expected to come to the classroom and forget their experiences as a mother, a father, a Mormon, a Muslim, an adopted child, an immigrant? How are teachers expected to do what nobody else can do? If I am the sum of my experiences—experiences that continually shape my experiences in the classroom, at work, at home—then why should teachers be distanced from the life that propelled them into the position they are in and to the interests they have? How do we ban people from letting their individually unique experiences influence their very logic, reason, rationales, discourses, emotional and physical selves, and especially their expertise in their field? Disagreement should necessarily invite conversation—what are a person’s lived experiences that have shaped this bias? Why should that be figured as a negative rather than another means of connecting with others who maybe aren’t like us?

Controversies and tensions among intellectuals are the foundation for knowledge making—social and scientific. Without serious debate and myriad approaches to understanding histories, concepts and theories, then what is intellectual diversity? For instance, I wonder how political science classes teach political controversies under this bill? How are the histories of political controversies taught and how are they discussed in relation to current events which we all experience already anyway. Why shouldn’t we talk about them? All of history is contested, which is indicated in our continued engagement with it. As a student, I need to be allowed to write and think about things that are important to me and my career. Further, I need teachers to be able to discuss controversial ideas with me, help me understand the complexity of issues: such as Senate Bill 83. I don’t necessarily see this bill as demonizing higher education and teachers nor as trying to assert authority over the fate of higher education in this state—I do see it as intentionally stifling one person’s idea of free speech and intellectual diversity in favor of another one. Perhaps we expand the notion of these ideals rather than confine them to a narrow, singularly constructed understanding of them.

Using student evaluation as a metric for innovative and effective classroom instruction is an ineffective approach to managing teaching performance because it promotes an easy path

forward for tenure and promotion and incentivizes the distribution of passing grades regardless of the quality of student intellectual work. This will create a means for bypassing the rigor of our classrooms. I don't want an education from a fearful instructor who is constantly on edge about how I perceive them and their teaching. Like bias, perspective can be fickle. I understand that I learn differently than my peers and I want my education to acknowledge that. I don't expect learning to be easy. I've been learning my entire life. It's hard. It's hard because it takes so much time and energy and the more difficult the concepts the more difficult it can be to come to terms with what they mean for you and your life—sometimes knowledge is troubling, conflicting, and life-changing. I don't want education to be easy, but I think this bill serves to make education less rigorous.