

Testimony of J. Brendan Shaw, PhD, M.A.  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair  
April 19, 2023

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

My name is J. Brendan Shaw, and I am a professor of English at Central State University, where I have taught for six years. I do not represent Central State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83. As a faculty member at a historically Black college (or HBCU), I feel that Black history and culture are central to the courses I teach, and this bill sets up a situation in which I might be forced to not fully honor that rich history. I understand college as a space where young people learn how to think critically and form their own opinions – often by engaging in debate on contemporary issues and coming to their own conclusions. By stifling the ability to discuss current and controversial issues in a controlled academic context, I believe my students will be less able to express themselves and come to their own decisions on important issues that they will face after graduation and enter the workforce. I teach courses in African American literature, women’s literature, and gender and sexuality studies. Many many times students have told me how glad they are to have the chance to take a course on these topics and I worry that this bill would have a chilling affect on my ability to teach much of the content that has enriched these classes. Often students (and lawmakers) mistakenly understand classes on identity to be about presenting a narrow ideology but on the contrary I encourage healthy debate on these issues after ensuring my students are informed. I don’t think anyone can make an informed decision on any issue without understanding it critically. I tell students in my introduction to gender and sexuality course that they need to understand the concepts being taught – not agree, but understand. I want students to be ready to work in a changing workforce and make their own decisions about topics like gender identity, sexuality, and racial difference. In order to do that, I need to be able to teach them about things that are already part of their lives. A student asked me about this bill recently and she was scared for the continued existence of programs like the minor in Gender and Sexuality Studies I recently created and courses like the Black Women’s Writing Class I am teaching currently. I take my job very seriously and I would like the state to continue to trust that I am trained (at Ohio State University) to be the educator that students need to tackle tough topics and become fully informed and critically engaged citizens.