

Testimony of Wren Burks  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair  
April 18th, 2023

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

Thank you for hearing my testimony today. My name is Wren Burks, and I am a graduate student of English: Composition and Rhetoric and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Miami University, which I have attended for a year. I am also a Graduate Teaching Assistant of English. However, I do not represent Miami University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

As a student of both English and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, this bill would directly impact the courses I take and the research that I do for my degree path. I am currently completing the first year of my two year degree program. This bill would essentially outlaw the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Certificate because it discusses topics which are considered controversial and divisive, which would nullify all of the work that I have previously put toward earning this degree for the past year. Additionally, the research I am conducting for my Master's thesis would also be outlawed under SB 83 because it engages topics of discussion and research such as gender identity and sexual orientation. As a student, I assert that it is of the utmost importance that we have the freedom to speak about and discuss these ideas this bill would consider harmful. Lawmakers argue that this bill will enable freedom of speech within college classrooms, yet it will effectively make the work I do illegal.

I also identify as part of the LGBTQ community. As a student, I feel that this bill would foster an environment of fear and censorship within university classrooms around my own personhood and existence. I, as well as other students, will be fearful to even attend class as individuals with multifaceted identities because this integral part of ourselves as people will be considered divisive. How does this reflect the American ideal of freedom of speech when we cannot express our opinions without fear of consequence, discrimination, or censorship within the classroom?

As a teaching assistant at an Ohio Public University, this bill will also make it extremely difficult to engage meaningfully with student learning and discussions. Recently, I had a student come to me and ask about a topic that would be considered controversial under this bill, which the student chose through no guidance of my own. They asked me to engage with their ideas in an intellectually rigorous way that would both make them a stronger critical thinker and writer. However, with this bill looming in the back of my mind, I was hesitant to even begin to answer the student's question or engage with their writing in any way for fear of potential backlash. Teachers cannot do good work when they work under fear, and the quality of education Ohio students receive will suffer.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.