

Testimony of Pranav Jani, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

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

My name is Dr. Pranav Jani, and I am a professor of English and director of Asian American Studies at Ohio State, where I will begin my 20th academic year in Fall 2024. I am also president of the Ohio State chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which has proudly defended academic freedom for over a century. I do not represent Ohio State, but I rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83.

Like hundreds of faculty and students across Ohio, I find Sub SB 83, and its companion bill Sub HB 151, to be misguided, contradictory, unnecessary, and—crucially—enormously expensive to implement with no demonstrable gain to the quality of higher education.

But in speaking with you today, I actually don't want to restate the many reasons I oppose this bill. Rather, I want to talk about what I believe is our common ground—intellectual freedom for students regardless of identity or politics.

On both sides of this bill, we claim to stand for intellectual diversity and freedom of thought. So: who is right? What's going on in our classrooms? Is there rampant abuse and censorship of some students that requires legislative intervention? Or is that position false?

I teach undergraduate and graduate classes in U.S. ethnic studies, and in a popular field in English called “postcolonial studies”—taking up literatures and histories of former colonies of Great Britain in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and other places.

I want to share with you today that my classroom already practices and contributes to diversity of thought – not because I avoid controversial topics or include each and every political opinion in our discussions, but because I engage with them as and when they are necessary to illuminate and comprehend what we are studying in our classes.

In fact, I want to share with you that *I am not even mainly concerned with what my students think politically*. Instead, I am focused on what they need to learn for their grasp of the course materials, and for their general intellectual growth and development as knowledge producers and responsible members of society.

Let me tell you a bit more about my classes, and how they promote—not hinder—freedom of thought.

First of all, my classes in ethnic studies and postcolonial studies *must* take up topics that this bill marks as “controversial.” While we talk about symbols and metaphors and narrative structure like in every English class, we also talk about many historical, social, and political topics like colonialism, structural racism, immigration and nationalism, gender and patriarchy, class divisions, and resistance.

Furthermore, following evidence-based scholarship in the fields of ethnic studies and postcolonial studies, we take strong positions against colonialism, slavery, and racism. We talk about categories like “oppressors and oppressed”—which SB 83 bans as “ideological”—because history shows us that, in many different scenarios, some groups were clearly victims of violence while others were clearly its perpetrators, enablers, and beneficiaries.

So, does that mean “intellectual diversity” is shut down in my classes? Does this mean students cannot express their views? Or that I see my role as merely feeding them information that they repeat back to me? Absolutely not.

As I tell my students on Day One: expect to be thrown in at the deep end, taking up topics and hearing positions that you may not have heard of, or may disagree with. But know that your grade is based not on whether you agree with me or the premises of the field, but whether you are willing to read critically, research widely, and formulate arguments backed by evidence.

Let’s get to the heart of the issue: I think the concern is that when we talk about controversial topics, or use terms like oppressors and oppressed, students who may share some identity or background or history with the oppressors may feel uncomfortable. But uncomfortable and difficult conversations is how we grow—if we are to believe philosophers like Socrates.

And this issue of discomfort doesn’t only apply to conservative students, or white students, or male students or what have you. The texts I choose, deliberately, illuminate histories that are so complex that each student in my classes, regardless of their politics and identity, will have a moment where they feel discomfort, raise debates, and engage in self-reflection.

Let me give you an example, using a text many may be familiar with: Dr. Martin Luther King’s 1963 essay, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Of course, this is the same text that SB 83 and HB 151 mandate as part of the curriculum for their proposed US History class.

Teaching the “Letter” after the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014 has been eye-opening, because students of different backgrounds and positions on BLM expect so many different things from Dr. King.

For conservative students, the “Letter” comes off as a defiantly “woke” text—a veritable precursor to BLM. The lines that especially grab such readers include King’s philosophical and political justifications for mass non-violent direct action and, famously, for breaking unjust laws.

For those already supportive of BLM, reading King presents questions too. They find him to be more radical than usually portrayed but are also surprised by how deeply his defiance was connected to his Christian faith and Western philosophy.

As a teacher, I anticipate that the “Letter” will create such debates—and try to find ways to tap into them. To open up space, I begin the class with a hard argument against Dr. King, quoting directly from the text and concluding that the “Letter” is basically an anarchist text for its promotion of mass civil disobedience against laws it doesn’t like. A successful class is one in which students, usually critical of my argument, actually voice their opinions, engage with the essay closely, and cite passages in their defense.

Exploring the many nuances of a novel or essay is how I approach teaching and opening up students' critical reading and writing skills. Which is far more complex than taking up "both sides" of the argument.

I don't have time to tell you, for example, about the Ghanian, Haitian, Indian and other novels and short stories we read in my "World Literature" class this past semester but let me underline this. While each of them was absolutely opposed to historical oppression—slavery, racism, colonialism, patriarchy, caste hierarchy, etc.—restating this opposition was not the main topic of our discussions. Rather, we followed these writers into complex depictions of worlds where class, gender, sexual, and social divisions within African and Asian communities *complicated* basic understandings of slavery and colonialism.

It bears noting that our very methods of teaching today, in the humanities and related fields, oppose the sort of authoritarian pedagogy imagined by this bill. We value *democratic* classrooms in which student voices are at the center. Seeing ourselves as guides and navigators to student knowledge, we create many opportunities for students to speak and lead.

Each class of mine this past semester, for instance, began with an oral presentation in which students were encouraged to take leadership of the class and shape what we discuss. My students and I are co-creators of the knowledge we gain in the classroom, with my expertise helping them to widen their intellectual horizons and develop critical reading and writing skills.

Our Ohio college students—who are none other than our children and grandchildren, our friends and neighbors—are smart, curious, self-motivated, and *diverse*. Each one of them has something to learn, and something important to contribute – that's how I approach them.

Every student who walks into the door of my classroom is *my* student, my responsibility. Whatever their race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, class position, nationality, religion, or political perspective, I care a great deal for them and their development.

Far from seeing students as empty vessels for me to fill with my opinions, my job is to teach them a skill set. My job is to teach them how to approach the work of research and thinking, not what to think. In fact, to do otherwise would be to go against my own democratic values.

I ask you to please reconsider and stop SB 83. The bill would stifle the organic, democratic, and open exchange of ideas that helps me teach my students. Let educators on the ground, not politicians and legislators sitting far way, determine how and what Ohio students learn.

Sincerely

Dr. Pranav Jani