

Testimony of Mytheli Sreenivas, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
May 15, 2023

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

My name is Dr. Mytheli Sreenivas, and I am a professor of History and Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for seventeen years. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Substitute Senate Bill 83.

Proponent testimony argued that Senate Bill 83 would counter liberal "indoctrination" in the university classroom. The Substitute Senate Bill 83 retains these provisions and labels certain topics as "controversial." However, as OSU professor Steven Lopez has explained in [*The Columbus Dispatch*](#), the claims of liberal bias in Ohio universities are based on "shoddy, ideologically-motivated research" and are not an accurate representation of what goes on in university teaching. I am here to state that in my classroom, and in the classrooms of my colleagues at Ohio's public universities, we are teaching critical thinking and evidence-based analysis. What we do is the opposite of "indoctrination."

Let me share with you an example from my teaching. As an expert in women's history, I regularly teach about topics that Substitute Senate Bill 83 identifies as "controversial," including abortion. For example, in a recent course, my students studied the history of abortion in various times and places, both in the United States and other countries. The students investigated why abortion became the subject of political debate in specific historical moments, and they conducted research about how these debates were connected to wider trends in politics and society. Far from "indoctrination," the class aimed to teach students how to analyze controversial issues from a historical perspective, and how to employ evidence in support of their arguments.

One way that students gained these skills was to practice analyzing historical primary sources. One day in class, for example, I took the students to OSU's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum. There, we spent a few hours looking together at newspapers and cartoons from the 1920s and 1930s that debated about birth control and abortion. For many students, it was the first time they had worked directly with physical primary sources—the material that is the basis for historical research and analysis. Students worked together to decipher these sources, to understand their arguments, and to put what they were reading into the context of what they already knew about the history of the time. Eventually, they developed their own original historical analyses based on these sources.

That afternoon in the library, students were learning how to interpret historical texts. Sometimes they disagreed with each other in their interpretations, and that too was part of the learning process. By the end of the class, they had a better grasp of how to evaluate information, how to judge among competing claims, and how to draw their own independent conclusions based on

the facts. Along the way, they learned that although abortion was controversial in the 1920s and 1930s, it was not for exactly the same reasons that it is controversial today.

We teach history for many reasons, but among them is to help students become informed citizens who can make thoughtful decisions about the issues facing our communities. I believe my teaching, including on controversial topics like abortion, contributes to this goal. However, Substitute Senate Bill 83, if passed into law, would have a chilling effect. In the words of the [American Historical Association](#), the bill would “undermine education in Ohio by preventing qualified instructors from teaching honest and accurate history.” Rather than teaching students how to come to informed conclusions about controversial topics, the law would discourage faculty from even raising such topics in our classroom. It would prevent, rather than support, education for citizenship.

As a teacher, I have tremendous respect and care for my students. It is an honor to be part of their academic journeys, and this is not a responsibility I take lightly. I welcome diversity of thought in my classroom, and I strive to create an environment where civic dialogue is the norm. My goal is to teach the skills of research, writing, critical reading, and historical analysis that enable Ohio students to understand our society’s complex challenges. Substitute Senate Bill 83’s labeling of certain topics as “controversial” offers nothing to benefit Ohio students, and instead, threatens much harm.

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