

To Chairman Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today.

My name is Dana Howard. I am assistant professor in the Department of Biomedical Anatomy and Education, at the Ohio State University College of Medicine. The views expressed in my testimony are my own as a concerned citizen and not those of my employer.

I write in very strong opposition to Senate Bill 83 and its companion bill in the Ohio House.

I bring two major concerns related to the bill as it is currently written:

The first concerns the role of student evaluation in professional advancement. The bill currently states that “student evaluations conducted pursuant to section 3345.451 of the Revised Code account for at least fifty per cent of the teaching area component of the evaluation.” [pg. 17]

There is widely documented disparities in the evaluations given by students to minority, non-native English speakers and female instructors. Moreover, I want to build on a point that Bear Braumoeller compellingly made in his excellent testimony in opposition to an earlier version of the bill: The use of student evaluations to account for at least 50% of the teaching component of professional evaluation will likely in the aggregate be used mostly against conservative faculty. As Prof. Braumoeller mentioned: “I try very hard to keep ideology out of my classroom, because the whole point of college is teaching students how to think, not what to think. Most of my colleagues do the same. Knowing what I know about student complaints, though, I assure you that if the system of post-tenure reviews described in the bill is implemented, my department and others like it will become less ideologically balanced rather than more.” Liberal students can use the language of this bill to complain about conservative members of our faculty just in the same way that conservative students may use it to complain about more progressive members of the faculty. It is good for students to have a venue to share their perspective about how the course has gone for them and for this feedback to inform faculty instruction, but using such an inflexible metric for tenure and promotion purposes will likely produce timidity amongst faculty who will shy away from open discussion.

Finally, there is a well-documented correlation between students’ expected grades and their evaluations of instructors. Students who expect to be doing well in a course will give the instructor higher evaluation scores. A recent study conducted by Prof. Vladimir Kogan and other colleagues at Ohio State University considered a variety of underlying explanations for this correlation, but ultimately, they conclude that “student grade satisfaction -- regardless of the underlying cause of the grades -- appears to be an important driver of course evaluations.”¹

¹ Kogan, Vladimir, Brandon Genetin, Joyce Chen, and Alan Kalish. (2022). Students' Grade Satisfaction Influences Evaluations of Teaching: Evidence from Individual-level Data and an Experimental Intervention. (EdWorkingPaper: 22-513). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/spsf-tc>

Basing 50% of teaching professional metrics on these student evaluations will likely incentivize and reward instruction practices that elevate grades without necessarily enhancing learning. This sort of incentive structure will undermine the stated aims of the bill – which holds that the Ohio’s public institutions of higher education should “educate students by means of free, open, and rigorous intellectual inquiry to seek the truth.” [Page 7 of SB 83] Basing teaching effectiveness primarily on student evaluations has the potential to undermine the rigor of courses.

The second concern is related to provision D and E about the SB 83 on pages 24-25 about specific concepts that should not be part of training or education. SB 83 states, “No state institution shall train any administrator, teacher, staff member, or employee to adopt or believe in any of the following concepts:” and it includes concepts such as “(1) One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.” I do not dispute that anyone in public institutions should be trained to believe in ideas such as “one race or sex is inherently superior to another.” I have never been in any trainings where any of the ideas that are brought up in (1)-(9) are advocated for. I don’t exactly see why this specific language is in the bill, but am not concerned about its inclusion. I am however concerned about the following provision, (E) which states that “No state institution shall hire any administrator, teacher, staff member, or employee to provide instruction on any of the concepts listed in divisions (D)(1) to (9) of this section.” This language is overly vague and does not distinguish between the prospect of teaching about an idea and asking students, staff, and faculty to actively embrace such ideas. When I teach the work of canonical figures like Aristotle or Rousseau, who explicitly held and defended views such as the inherent superiority of one sex over another, I do not cherry pick from the writings only the things that I agree with or approve of. That would do a disservice to my students and would disrespect their intelligence. Provision E would basically go against the stated aim of the bill, without even having the ability to provide instruction about these issues we do “not allow and encourage [our] students to reach their own conclusions” about the merits of these important thinkers and their controversial ideas. Even if this provision isn’t meant to apply to classroom instruction, as written, it will predictably have a chilling effect in curriculum design and will stifle open and informed discussions in the classroom.

Thank you for your time and for allowing us to share our concerns as citizens of the state of Ohio.

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