



Higher Education Destruction Act
SB 83 - Opposition | May 16th

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Miller, and members of the House Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. My name is Kathryn Poe, I use they/them pronouns, and I am here on behalf of Equality Ohio today in opposition of **SB 83**. Perhaps most importantly, I am a recent college graduate. I graduated from Capital University in 2020 and I am a proud English Major and, hopefully, a soon-to-be student pursuing my Masters in Bioethics.

Today, I'd like to address the amended version of **SB 83** that would still include vague language about "segregation" based on race, sex, gender, ethnicity and religion - which will still apply to credit earned classes - and would prevent faculty and staff from teaching on topics in any way that may "support" a certain topic or "interfere with so-called intellectual diversity" rights of students. This is an all out attack on academic freedom that will make it impossible for professors to properly teach many subjects, but most of all the humanities.

As I'm sure that many of you in this room have heard before, English is often cited as a useless degree. When I first announced my intent to study English, specifically Creative Writing, in college, I got the usual comments. *What are you going to do with that? How are you going to get a job with an English degree?* In 2019, students majoring in English were down more than a [quarter \(25.5 percent\)](#) since the Great Recession, according to data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics. Of the majors tracked by the center, English [had the biggest drop](#) in participation.

This decreased interest is undoubtedly due to the devaluation of an English degree, likely because of a common misunderstanding about why humanities are valuable. I didn't spend four years in college learning about the most objective parts of English like grammar and spelling. I spent four years learning about storytelling, learning to build complex arguments, and the history of literature.

English is interpretive, down to the very basis of its study. If you put a bunch of English majors in a room, we can't even decide whether or not an author's identity is relevant to a text when considering it. When studying any literature at the college level, the viewpoint of the person writing, the viewpoint of the person reading, and the words on the page are in constant play and up for discussion.



How then, would anyone study or teach English literature ever again, in the face of a bill like **Senate Bill 83**? Do we remove the author, the content, the argument? Do we remove the people? What do we write about? What new ideas do we bring to the table? As an LGBTQ+ person myself, do you remove people like me from your libraries and how do you do it? Queer topics, and other “so-called” controversial topics, are not as easy as you think to identify, especially at college and graduate level.

For example, will we stop teaching the entire works of Emily Dickinson? - A woman whose sexuality and its effect on her work are still debated in scholarship to this day. Will we remove *Frankenstein* from the literary canon? - A book that has inspired 200 years of scholarship on disability rights and gender studies. Will we remove all discussion and classes on Shakespeare from Ohio colleges? - Because discussions of Queerness, gender, and sexuality are deeply immersed in many of Shakespeare's most important plays. How do we discuss and teach the thoughts of Frederick Douglass and DeBois without considering what their words mean for racism today? How do we read *the Diary of Anne Frank* without reflecting on the antisemitism of today? What will the state decide is the line between a love poem and a controversial sexual statement? Where do we draw the line between controversy in politics then and now? In a field where there is an argument for every perspective, which one is the objective, unbiased one and who decides? When the perspective shared is the one that is convenient for the state, that is not academic freedom.

You cannot remove the controversy, discussion, and messiness of literature without removing English and literature itself - there is nothing to write, think, or discuss about Literature if not making an argument about people, society, and uncomfortable topics.

This is what writers and academics do in the humanities - they think about and discuss real world problems and teach their perspective. And without the humanities, we lose so much - our stories, our thoughts, our art, our histories, and often ourselves.

What **Senate Bill 83** will really do is remove the stories and perspectives of LGBTQ+ people and other minorities from the classroom, and complicate academic freedom to an extreme extent. This bill would be devastating for Ohio colleges, professors, and students like me. If I, at 18, had lived in a state where the government censored education to this extent, I would have left and never come back.

Rather than continue to discourage intellectual curiosity, I hope this legislature will appreciate the importance of freedom to have rigorous classroom discussions, and will reject **Senate Bill 83**. Please vote no on **Senate Bill 83**. Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.