

Mark Ridenour Testimony in Support of Ohio SB117

Good morning. My name is Mark Ridenour, and I come here to offer testimony in support of SB 117 as a citizen of this state. I also bring my experience as a graduate of Miami University of Ohio and Chair Emeritus of its board of trustees. I am a current member and officer of the board of directors of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, deeply focused on issues of educational excellence in American higher education.

American civic life is what binds us together. It has been my honor to serve on the boards of many nonprofit organizations, including several independent high schools, Lourdes University in Sylvania, Ohio, the Toledo Zoological Society, Mercy Health Partners, and I am the Founding President of the Susan G. Komen Foundation's Northwest Ohio Affiliate. I believe in public service!

It is this focus on the urgency of better and deeper civic education in higher education that brings me here today.

One thing I would like to emphasize above all. For the legislature to appropriate funding through SB 117 to two of Ohio's public universities to establish a new center at The Ohio State University and a new Institute at the University of Toledo is a gift to Ohio and to the nation.

Across the nation, discerning public leaders and legislators have answered to the taxpayers of their states by establishing programs, resources, and guidelines for publicly funded institutions of higher learning. Arizona State University's School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, founded with funding from the Arizona state legislature, can boast in its sixth year: øf

- A new undergraduate major and minor in Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership: enrollments have climbed to 900 students in 2020-21, with 70 majors and 40 minors.
- A master's degree in Classical Liberal Education and Leadership.
- A State Seal of Civic Literacy for high school diplomas
- A Civic Literacy Curriculum for Arizona teachers to help them "prepare the next generation of leaders for American political and civil society"
- A Summer Civic Leadership Institute for high school students
- New research in American political thought
- A Civic Discourse Lecture Series for the public

I raise the Arizona State model not to say that it is precisely what these two great Ohio institutions should develop, but to show the vast potential that such new, independent institutes or centers can have to provide educational opportunities that just haven't been happening on campuses around the nation. Such centers or institutes represent a growing, national movement, witness the Hamilton Center at the University of Florida, the newly proposed School of Civic Life and Leadership at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the Institute of American Civics at the University of Tennessee. Ohio should not be left behind. The commitment of these institutions to open debate and discourse and to intellectual diversity addresses a desperate need both on campus and in American society at large.

On that last point, a Pew Research poll last August showed that just in the last six years, the percentage of Americans who find members of the other political party to be "immoral" has risen roughly 30%. The charge of "unintelligent" has risen 20%. As a nation, we are in peril when we exile the better angels of our nature and demonize rather than talk openly as citizens of a free society. It is time for higher education to be part of the solution. That is one of the reasons I cherish the intent of SB 117.

I speak now as a former board chair of Miami University of Ohio. The responsibilities charged to the boards of trustees in SB117 are fully appropriate and in line with the notion of shared governance. Too often, the adjective "shared" is elided from our understanding of shared governance. Trustees cannot and must not abandon their duty to be guardians of academic excellence. Their role is far more important than selecting the president and approving the budget. They are the crucial interface between the educational imperatives of the campus and the needs of business, industry, government, and society at large. It indicates no disrespect to faculty expertise for the trustees appointed by the governor (or, indeed, for legislators elected by the people) to be active interlocutors in ensuring that those who attend our public institutions leave ready for challenging careers and engaged, informed citizenship. When those who answer the public recognize the need for new programs and new academic requirements, they are acting in accord with shared governance and academic freedom. I say bravo to Senators Cirino and McColley for sponsoring this bill. My only quibble is that it is not sufficiently expansive: we need such a center at University of Miami, and I am sure there are other public universities in this state that would welcome such opportunities.

If a tall, red-haired gentleman from Virginia's past named Thomas Jefferson were to stride into this room, I anticipate he might say something to this effect: "When my fellow commissioners for the University of Virginia met on August 4, 1818 at the Rockfish Gap tavern – back then, we knew how to schedule a board meeting! – we acknowledged that we were there to answer to *the requirement of the Legislature* for the development of the higher branches of education. And we were very specific about what that meant:

To form the statesmen, legislators, and judges, on whom public prosperity and individual happiness are so much to depend

To expound the principles and structure of government

Good sirs, I applaud you for doing exactly what the elected representatives of the people should do. I cannot add to what I imagine Thomas Jefferson would have said.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer, respectfully, my own thoughts as a citizen of Ohio and those of our ACTA and our Chairman, a Nevada resident and another proud Miami graduate, John A. Altman. Classic liberal arts education is not a quagmire, it is an opportunity to be excellent and restore our traditions of debate, academic exploration, and free expression.