

**Proponent Testimony on S. B. No. 117,
“Establish Certain Entities at Ohio State and University of Toledo”
Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee**

May 17, 2023

Adam Kissel
Higher Education Policy Professional

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Smith, and distinguished members of the Committee, I am Adam Kissel, Visiting Fellow for Higher Education Reform at a think tank in D.C., speaking for myself, in favor of S. B. No. 117. Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts.

I have worked in higher education policy, advocacy, and philanthropy throughout my career. I was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Higher Education Programs at the U.S. Department of Education under Secretary DeVos. I serve on the U.S. Semiquincentennial Commission’s Advisory Council on Civics and Civic Engagement.

I also helped Arizona State University develop the academic programs that became the School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership, which is to some extent a model for the entities that S. B. No. 117 would create.

Mr. Chair, there are two major problems that these new entities would address. One is the lack of civic knowledge among adults. The other is the lack of viewpoint diversity on college campuses.

Regarding civic knowledge, American adults know very little about our system of government. The Annenberg Public Policy Center documents it every year for Constitution Day. Only 47% of U.S. adults can name all three branches of government. One in four can’t name any branch, and one in four can’t name a single First Amendment freedom.¹ High school civics is clearly insufficient.

Regarding viewpoint diversity, students across Ohio and nationwide report alarming rates of self-censorship and the inability to have a civil conversation about contentious social and political issues. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression conducts an annual survey of the free speech climate for students, and the results are poor. At Ohio State University, four out of five students say they feel pressure to avoid discussing controversial topics in class. Half say they at least sometimes self-censor. One in five say it could be acceptable to use violence to stop a campus speech. And while OSU ranks above average in the survey even with these results, most Ohio colleges rank below average.²

In this climate, it makes good sense to develop a school or a center at your flagship university that is dedicated to viewpoint diversity around fundamental civic education. It also makes good sense to provide such a high-quality, neutral program at other universities, including at their law schools.

¹ <https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/political-communication/civics-knowledge-survey/>

² <https://rankings.thefire.org/rank/explore/>

In my philanthropy work, I have helped maybe two dozen universities develop new academic centers, including the school at Arizona State University (ASU). Mr. Chair, I would like to name a few excellent features of this bill that set up these projects for success.

First is independence in hiring. In my experience, many university faculty do not want new centers to succeed. They dislike the competition for students, they are jealous of the new resources, and the progressive faculty dislike the idea of a neutral center that *doesn't* try to indoctrinate students. At ASU there was what I would call an “evil dean” who did everything she could to thwart the hiring of excellent, qualified faculty. That’s one reason the Arizona legislature created the new school—to avoid such maneuvers by existing academic departments. S. B. No. 117 wisely puts the Chase Center directly under the president and provost and ensures that the Chase Center can hire its own tenure-track faculty.

Second is the advisory council that selects a director, for similar reasons. ASU put together an all-star council (none of whom were from Arizona) that recommended hiring an outstanding first director. As a result, he assembled an all-star faculty that established high-quality and well-regarded courses and programs.

Third is curriculum authority, again for similar reasons.

Other states have been following in Arizona’s footsteps. Ohio has a great opportunity to join them as one of the leaders in university-level civic education.

I conclude by commending the sponsors of this bill. Many public universities have broken the public trust by letting their campuses stray away from objectivity and into activism. Too many state legislatures have failed to use their prerogatives for oversight and accountability to get back to the objectivity and viewpoint diversity that advances a university’s core mission. This bill would exercise your prerogatives for the public good.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment.