

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

My name is Richard Fletcher, I am a British-born US citizen, Ohio voter, and associate professor at The Ohio State University in the Department of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy.

I would like to begin my testimony in strong opposition to Senate Bill 117 by reading the Land Acknowledgment from the website of The Ohio State University's Center for Belonging and Social Change, formerly the Multicultural Center. It was written by Dr. Melissa Beard Jacob (Sault St. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians) in 2018 and updated and edited by Madison Eagle (Cherokee and Shawnee) in 2022.

We would like to acknowledge the land that The Ohio State University occupies is the ancestral and contemporary territory of the Shawnee, Potawatomi, Delaware, Miami, Peoria, Seneca, Wyandotte, Ojibwe and many other Indigenous peoples. Specifically, the university resides on land ceded in the 1795 Treaty of Greenville and the forced removal of tribes through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. As a land grant institution, we want to honor the resiliency of these tribal nations and recognize the historical contexts that has and continues to affect the Indigenous peoples of this land.

Given that Senate Bill 117 seeks to create a new Center at The Ohio State University, where I have taught since 2006, in a somewhat comparable gesture to settler institutions developing land acknowledgments, it is important to recognize the context, not only into which this Center will be placed, but also from which the Center has emerged. This will help us answer two pressing questions: what was the motivation for this Bill? What impact is it likely to have if passed?

While I am submitting this opposition testimony as a private citizen, and not on behalf of The Ohio State University or any entity therein, my perspective is grounded in 15 plus years experience working within and in relation to numerous Centers and Institutes, from The Center for Epigraphical and Palaeographical Studies and The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies while teaching in the Department of Classics (2006-2018) to the Barnett Center for Integrated Arts and Enterprise and the Center of Ethnic Studies, in my current role as an Arts Educator (2018-present). All of this work has been interdisciplinary in nature, and often grounded in curriculum development.

The Ohio State University is home to many established Centers and Institutes, governed by Faculty Rules which determine their creation and administration, including the curriculum. The rule states that “neither university nor college centers may establish independent course offerings and degree programs” that said, “they may participate in cooperative programs involving course offerings and degree programs within existing academic units.”¹ This rule is directly undermined by the proposed legislation, which gives the Center's director not only the power to ‘hire all faculty and staff’, but also over “the development of the center's curriculum.” Furthermore, “The center shall be granted the authority to offer courses and develop certificate, minor, and major

¹ 3335-3-36 Centers and institutes <https://trustees.osu.edu/bylaws-and-rules/3335-3>

programs as well as graduate programs.”² Yet, no such authority can be granted without destroying the integrity of the university’s Faculty Rules.

So regardless of the ungrounded impetus for this legislation – an impetus that echoes that of Senate Bill 83 – to de-wokify our college campuses and the cost to tax-payers to foot the bill, this legislation attempts to overrule shared governance between faculty and administrators, especially when it comes to the curriculum.

But, when we understand the context out of which Senate Bill 117 – and its bigger, uglier brother Senate Bill 83 – emerged, we can gain a clearer picture that this destructive power grab is the point. And control of what is taught, how, and by whom is at the center of the Center proposal. Senate Bill 117 is part of a coordinated, well-funded national movement to turn institutions of higher education into the breeding grounds of a reactionary, extreme right-wing ideology for a form of social change grounded in white cultural hegemony that sets to negate the advances our country has made in civil rights and social justice since the 1960s. The basic model is as follows (and here I want to acknowledge the vital work of Isaac Kamola, Associate Professor at Trinity College, Hartford)³:

The Koch Donor Network at their twice-yearly summits sets the agenda, then Centers and Institutes like those proposed in this Bill generate the raw material, and also an important veneer of academic legitimacy, which are then passed on to think tanks, those second-hand dealers of ideas, becoming model legislation and part of issue mobilization groups, ending up where we find ourselves today with this legislation.

When Senator Cirino mentioned how this Center at OSU and the Institute at the University of Toledo are not unprecedented at the first hearing of this Bill – referencing comparable entities in the University of Florida and Arizona State – if you look into the origins and development of these Centers, you can see the strategy working in reverse. It is shadowy group called The Council on Public University Reform that engineered the Florida legislature to create the Hamilton Center for Classic and Civics Education, while at Arizona State, initial funding for their new Center was then taken together with two Koch funded Centers.

In addition to following the money, when it comes to Senate Bill 117, it is also important to follow the model legislation that this money funds. Senate Bill 117 is based, at times word for word on Model Legislation of the Civics Alliance, developed by the National Association of Scholars, specifically called the ‘School of Intellectual Freedom Act’.⁴ On their website the NAS boast the success of the Center at Arizona State which, I quote “should be staffed with courageous dissenters from the activist establishment, will have the administrative autonomy that allows it to teach proper courses on the nature of intellectual freedom, the Western heritage, and the American heritage.”⁵

² SB 117 Sec. 3335.39.(E)(3).

³ See *Free Speech and Koch Money: Manufacturing a Campus Culture War* (with Ralph Wilson) (2021).

⁴ <https://civicsalliance.org/school-of-intellectual-freedom-act/>

⁵ <https://civicsalliance.org/school-of-intellectual-freedom-act/>

Key parts of this School are not only development and oversight of a mandated 3-credit hour course in American history or government, which we have already seen in Senate Bill 83, but also the generation of a ‘Core Curriculum’ – equivalent to our General Education Requirements at Ohio State – in which any courses that include experimental learning or devoted to what they dub ‘sub-groups of Americans’ must be excluded in favor of ‘Western Civilization, British Literature, and Greek Philosophy.’⁶ Here we have arrived at the endgame – universities being told what they can teach and how they should teach. Yet it is the students who suffer when their education is gerrymandered in this way.

I want to end by taking you back to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has described as the start of ‘something new’, a ‘unique plan’ for ‘the constitutional construction of the fiscal-military settler state, with both ethnic cleansing of the Native presence and chattel slavery producing racial capitalism’.⁷

This plan stretches to the progressive educational ideals of the ordinance espoused by Reverend Manasseh Cutler, who wrote that, because this region, unlike old Europe, had ‘no inveterate systems to overturn’.⁸ But at Ohio State, and I have no doubt at the University of Toledo as well, we have developed systems for diverse, equitable, and inclusive teaching that would be overturned by the imposition of these ‘entities’, created by out of state vested interests.

To bring us back to the here and now, let me share the words of Navajo, Creek and Greek artist Anna Tsouhlarakis, whose work *The Native Guide Project: Columbus* has accompanied the writing of this as well as my opposition testimony to Senate Bill 83 and House Bill 151. Currently displayed at the Wexner Center of the Arts, Tsouhlarakis has the phrase, in black text on a white background, posted outside the building on Ohio State’s campus:

IT’S TRUE, THERE WAS A VOICE BEFORE COLUMBUS

While as you head down High Street, you’ll see on the digital billboards, this phrase:

IT MAY BE CALLED COLUMBUS, BUT IT’S STILL NATIVE LAND

I am proud to live in Ohio and work at The Ohio State University precisely because we are making this place and its flagship land-grant institution more attuned to its responsibilities to ALL peoples who were once here and are now here. The Center of Senate Bill 117, like the lonely statue of Columbus still standing at the Statehouse, is a relic of the past – a past of violence, erasure, and exclusion that any citizen who cares for creating a just and diverse world does not want to return to.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to take any questions you may have.

⁶ <https://civicsalliance.org/core-curriculum-act/>

⁷ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz *Not a Nation of Immigrants: Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy, and a History of Erasure and Exclusion*. (2021), p. 19.

⁸ David McCullough *The Pioneers: The Heroic Story of the Settlers Who Brought the American Ideal West* (2019) p. 32.