

Testimony of Christopher Nichols, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
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Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is Christopher Nichols, and I am a professor of history and national security studies, and Woody Hayes Chair in National Security Studies, at The Ohio State University. I was recently recruited to come to Ohio State after ten years teaching on the west coast at another flagship land grant university and another several years teaching and working at a range of public and private universities and colleges. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting my testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 117 (SB 117).

I'd like to open by saying that I would be pleased to discuss the specifics of why a center or institute structured as the bill lays out is deeply problematic in terms of organizational coherence and in terms of faculty, staff, students, and connections to the colleges and university in which it is proposed to be embedded, as well as in terms of the vision and engagement of the community. My answers will be grounded in my extensive experience with centers and institutes and my involvement in external assessment of centers and institutes and directors thereof. I have been involved in centers and institutes since I began my graduate studies. I have been a dissertation fellow, postdoctoral scholar, and affiliated fellow faculty at centers and institutes in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Oregon, Iowa, and Ohio. I directed a humanities center at a public land grant university for five years. I'm currently affiliated – with part of my faculty line is located in – The Mershon Center for International Security Studies at OSU. I collaborate closely with faculty at centers and institutes at OSU, across the U.S., and around the world.

My opposition to this bill is thorough-going but I will single out four central elements of my concern and critique of the proposals in SB 117. I center my analysis on the proposed Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society to be located at the Ohio State University as I am less familiar with the University of Toledo and the center there would be part of the College of Law, which is quite different from what is proposed for the Chase Center at OSU.

First, imposition.

I oppose the notion of an externally imposed, state-mandated center or institute with a specific set of prescriptions for research, teaching, and organizational structure.

Second, duplication.

In the case of the proposed OSU Chase Center I am aware of no consultation with faculty to develop the center and no efforts within OSU to establish such a center. OSU already has more than 70 centers and institutes many of which have comparable programs – such as programs for civic discourse and ideological diversity, including student internships and coursework dedicated to exploring and deepening ideas about democracy in U.S. and international comparative perspectives, ethics and values, public programs, and activities for research, faculty support, and more. For example, there is already an [Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability](#) (IDEA),

housed in the College of Arts and Sciences, drawing on faculty from across OSU and led by faculty in political science.

The IDEA Institute's mission is to: "mobilize the resources of the academy to serve the public good in our local, state, national, and international communities. We focus on three related areas: generating and disseminating knowledge about American political institutions, with a special emphasis on elections; studying and fostering high quality political dialogue and deliberation; and furthering the university's mission announced in its motto: "education for citizenship.""

OSU also has a Center for Ethics and Human Values (CEHV), housed in the College of Arts and Sciences, which operates a range of university-wide programs, including being central to OSU's Civil Discourse Project by running the fascinating and high-impact [Civil Discourse for Citizenship program](#) that supports and trains undergraduates who choose to enroll in the practice of civil discourse – on topics that span the political spectrum. As the mission statement notes: "The program developed with extensive feedback from students, at its heart are the "4Cs": Be Curious, Be Charitable, Be Conscientious, and Be Constructive. [The] CEHV trains Civil Discourse Fellows to plan and serve as moderators in Civil Discourse Forums featuring speakers who disagree on contentious issues." (This includes "a new 3-credit course on free speech and civil discourse [ARTSSCI 2400/E] and dialogue facilitation workshops for students outside the classroom.")

There are many more centers and institutes at OSU that do similar work, such as the [Mershon Center for International Security Studies](#) with which I am affiliated. The Mershon Center aims to "advance interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to international, national, and human security." It does so in a number of ways, hosting visiting scholars and postdoctoral fellows, supporting student research, and by "organizing conferences, symposia, and workshops that bring together scholars, government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and business leaders from around the world to discuss the latest research in national and international security affairs."

OSU also is currently developing a university-wide leadership major and minor, which includes numerous elements of what is proposed in the specifics of the Chase Center (SB 117, p. 3).

Third, departure from best practices and from precedents at OSU, in Ohio, and nationally.

As is likely obvious but is worth stating plainly: it is best practice for new centers and institutes to be generated out of the energy and engagement as well as vision of faculty, students, staff, and administrators, often going hand-in-hand, then, with direct requests for supporting funds from foundations, donors, national, and state support, public and private, and from within the institution itself. Indeed, faculty and staff have to go through a great deal of effort and satisfy a plethora of criteria to clear a fairly high bar in order to establish a new center or institute. This involves having sufficient resources over time (not simply the proposed two years of funding), capacious vision, engaged faculty and staff, usually from different fields, potential for developing new and ongoing support and broadening the center's constituency, and alignment with the university and usually college's strategic plan.

Without an on-campus pre-existing engaged-constituency, in my experience and having interviewed dozens of center and institute directors, very often externally imposed centers and institutes falter and fail. If there is no one and no institutional support to push them forward, no internal plan and proposal, as administrations change and faculty come and go, centers and institutes simply tend to

wither, and often rapidly. Universities and colleges across the U.S. are littered with failed, hollow centers and institutes imposed from above or left to shrivel after funding has run out.

Fourth, the Chase Center is not structured to fit established organizational framework.

The way SB 117 is written this center simply does not fit with how public universities almost always run and structure centers and institutes—and, in particular, how OSU’s organizational framework operates for centers and institutes. Across the landscape of public higher education in the U.S. there are almost no centers or institutes that function in the many ways that the proposed Chase Center would operate.

To my knowledge there are no centers or institutes at OSU, at least the humanities and social sciences, that have faculty tenure lines (tenure initiating units, “TIUs” as we term them at OSU) located within a center or institute. All TIUs to my knowledge are in disciplinary departments and this is how virtually every public university across the U.S. operates. In addition, across the country with very few exceptions, centers and institutes at major land grant public universities do not have majors, minors, certificate programs, and graduate programs; some do have certificates or offer a few courses, many have mentoring and internship programs, and some offer postdoctoral fellowships and scholarship and fellowship support. But they are not central hubs for teaching.

In terms of reporting, the vast majority of centers and institutes are established within colleges and report to the dean thereof, or, alternatively, are primarily research centers and report to a research chief administrator, often a vice provost. Thus, what the Chase Center most closely approximates is a small department, school, or college dropped down in the middle of the university. To be clear: what it does not look like as proposed is anything approximating a center or institute as they currently operate at OSU in the social sciences or liberal arts. It also would not operate in keeping with how the vast majority of centers and institutes work on virtually all U.S. campuses. In the very least, this unwieldy structure as proposed means such a center will begin with a tremendous bureaucratic amount of work ahead simply to set up operations to fit the current organizational framework of OSU.

The problems of such a proposed structure are manifold. Take for example, **hiring and appointments**.

The bill requires the center to be an “independent academic unit...with the authority to house tenure-track faculty who hold appointments in the center” but that is not how OSU or virtually any public universities work. At the May 17th hearing, proponents suggested that this is a good thing. Yet each department, as is common practice across universities and colleges in the U.S. as at OSU, will need to have a say in hiring faculty in a given field, whether it be political science, history, literary studies, philosophy, sociology, or others; faculty in those departments are the relevant experts, after all. Disciplinary faculty vote on whether a faculty member in the TIU comes in as a tenure-track faculty member; their disciplinary expertise is necessary for annual reviews of scholarship, teaching, and service, for merit raises, peer reviews of teaching, and post-tenure review. Disciplines and cross-disciplinary TIUs are also how relevant service is allocated, at least in terms of how much of their tenure “line” is in the unit. All of this prompts many questions unanswered by the bill: how much of each faculty line will be located at the Center and how much in the unit? How will that impact teaching and service allocations (which flow from those percentages of appointment)? Will the units (or college(s)) have to pay that percentage of the salary and benefits?

The bill's mention of "joint appointments" is a really thorny issue in the academy and is given exceedingly short shrift in SB 117. As someone currently with a split appointment, I know how complicated this can be: envision having two employers and a minimum of three areas of work for each (research, teaching, and service). What percentage will the faculty be and in which area (e.g., 50% Chase Center, 50% Political Science)? And what is the rationale for this allocation? What about different teaching and research expectations that vary by field? How will assessment and review operate? What will the processes and procedures for evaluation across units of joint appointment, on scholarship, teaching, and service be? How will change be handled if faculty want to shift percentages or even to other units altogether? There is a lot to clarify. And all of this is glossed over in the vaguely definitive language of the bill requiring that the center's hiring, mandate for joint appointments, and the "guarantee [of] reappointment elsewhere in the university" [(B) (1) and (B) (2)].

The bill also states that the center director "shall hire all faculty and staff of the center." This just is not how national searches for faculty are done in the United States. Even if it could be accomplished this way it would generate significant disapproval and perhaps worse by faculty and staff because of the enormous deviation it would represent from the norms of academic national searches. The usual process for a national search involves a job description based on a department's need, approved by deans and provosts, which is the product of departmental discussion and written by a committee, then, led by a chair from a disciplinary or cross-disciplinary department or school, "job ads" are placed nationally, seeking specific required materials, followed by screening interviews, official committee recommendations, with finalists brought in and assessed during a campus visit comprised of formal talks and meetings with students, faculty, and staff, culminating in assessments, discussion, debate, in a formal parliamentary process with votes by relevant faculty. This type of search process is essential to meet national and disciplinary standards for a reputable top university, another other than that has the potential to undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of the proposed new center.

On finances: It is essential to add that the bill requires "not fewer than fifteen tenure-track faculty to teach under the center." If we assume that these are all new hires, as is the Center director and at least two-to-three staff members, the total size of the Chase Center would be around twenty. This is comparable to many smaller or mid-sized social science or humanities departments. And for tenure-stream faculty, assuming excellent work and tenure, and public as well as scholarly programming and research support, teaching innovation programs, civics outreach and engagement, the proposed budget is likely to be too low to sustain over time. Should supporting funds not continue into the future beyond the two years in the proposed bill, the Chase Center would potentially become a significant impediment and ongoing burden in terms of the salary and benefits for the staff and faculty, even if programs were curtailed, saddled on whatever part of the university it reports to. This is why university centers and institutes usually grow slowly in terms of ongoing support and commitments, making sure at every step what is being developed can be supported for the long-term and that there is an internal constituency that is sufficiently engaged as well as continuing resources to make the center's mission viable and vibrant.

On the council and Center leadership: Admirably, the bill notes that Academic Council members must have appropriate experience, but that language remains too vague. I would urge adding clarification such as a relevant advanced degree and higher education experience in teaching and research. Almost all centers and institutes have boards or council with the majority of those serving being internal rather than being almost all external, as the bill suggests. Why? Because the vast

majority of center and institute governance is internal and consultative. Decisions are made regarding calls for fellowships and internships; assessment of proposals for research, projects, classes, and grants; and strategic planning related to those areas and more. Even in the case of working on, for example, Ohio civics curricular efforts, it would be advantageous to have OSU education faculty experts as part of that process, whether they are on Council or as part of an ad hoc or standing committee on the subject. Instead, problematically, SB 117 states that “Not more than one member of the council may be an employee of the university. Not less than three members of the advisory board shall be from Ohio.” This presents a substantial issue; centers and institutes, in my experience, must have leadership that has local, institutional knowledge and expertise, and relevant higher ed area research, teaching, and administrative experience. They also must have faculty and staff buy-in (without which they are in significant trouble – who will apply for grants and participate in programs, who will invite students or encourage them to take classes, do internships, etc.?). The mandates about the Academic Council in the proposal (and in the May 17th hearing about the “bi-partisanship” of the council) are emblematic of the numerous other problems laid out in establishing the contours of the center. It misunderstands what a viable center will need and how it can operate to be successful and achieve its objectives.

Regarding teaching: The proposed Chase Center has issues. Classes at OSU can stand alone but almost all have disciplinary course descriptors (e.g., HIST), which are more easily legible to students. Classes also must be established and proposed through existing curricular processes; they are best designed when they fulfill General Education requirements and fit with existing disciplinary or interdisciplinary curriculum (among other reasons, so that they enroll enough students). In this light, every element of what a Chase Center can do independently would be far better done in collaboration with disciplines like history and political science and in terms of cross-listed classes.

In sum, an externally mandated and state-imposed Chase Center is highly duplicative of OSU programs already operating and of the over 70 centers and institutes at OSU. The structure is not legible or fully operable as a center or institute as currently constructed, most notably in terms of proposed hiring and organizational structure. SB117’s proposal comes without serious internal support and as such, in my view, it is very likely to create something that takes quite a few years to set up, requiring significant energy and resources, and then withers without a sufficiently engaged internal constituency or ongoing long-term external support. In short, as proposed, the Chase Center is a recipe for failure.

Given the concerns that the center is meant to address, funding existing centers and institutes (e.g. IDEAs, CEHV, Mershon) with some of these mandates might be a better option to achieve core elements of what is proposed here. Another alternative might be establishing endowed chairs (e.g., we have no endowed chair explicitly for an Ohio Historian or in the history of Constitutional Law and Civics at OSU).

As I move toward the end of my testimony I wanted to add my thanks and note a few areas that we agree and that I support. I very much appreciate that this Committee and the Ohio State Legislature more broadly are seeking to support higher education in the state. Thank you.

As a U.S. historian, national security studies expert, public speaker, program organizer, and civics educator, I am deeply concerned about the pernicious place of misinformation in American public life and the obvious lack of knowledge about the nation’s past, about key concepts regarding

government and democracy, and also about free speech. I worry intensively about disdain for higher education and for knowledge, which is evidenced in polling by Gallup and Pew and tends to be associated with the U.S. political right. I have devoted my life's work to researching, teaching, and understanding of U.S. and world history. To be clear, I am dedicated to pursuit of knowledge, to encouraging students and communities to learn, discuss, and come their own conclusions based on facts and evidence, as are my colleagues.

But it is also worth noting that much of this seeming crisis of young people's knowledge about history and society and lack of "civility" in political life and discourse is not new. If you trace these trends back over time, virtually every generation in U.S. history, and especially since the rise of fairly reliable public opinion polling the 1930s, has lamented how little the next generations knows, the poor state of civics knowledge overall, and how little younger adults understand about the government and respect history (and often elders and traditions). But noting that this is an historical pattern is not to suggest we should not address the problem. To alleviate some of these concerns, I implore you to empower experts here in Ohio. Let us professional historians help to conceive and write what a history curriculum should look like and would be best to try to apply across the state. A historians' led commission could make recommendations for what a mandated U.S. history/American government curriculum could or should look like and might also generate meaningful buy-in from across Ohio universities and colleges to generate the bi-partisan approach I've heard in committee meetings as being something we all can aspire to and that would better reflect the needs and interests of Ohioans of all backgrounds.

I ask you to please consider my testimony and vote NO on this bill. If you must pursue this policy, please do so with a revised proposal. I urge you strongly to please pause now, work closely with faculty and staff partners and dramatically revise the bill in light of the myriad problems that I have outlined.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Yours sincerely,
-Christopher Nichols