

Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
SB117 Opponent Testimony

Chairperson Cirino, Vice-Chair Michael Rulli, Ranking Member Kent Smith, and members of the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee, I thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in opposition to SB117.

My name is Wahinya Njau, and I will be beginning my master's education at Kent State University this fall where I will be studying political science. Along with that, I am also a graduate of The Ohio State University where I majored in history and minored in classics. And as a former student of OSU, I will focus my testimony on the proposed Salmon P. Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society. My worry regarding the proposed legislation is the continued slow encroachment of the state micro-managing the experience of higher education in Ohio.

The remedy sought by SB117 to foster what is described as "intellectual diversity" is a noble goal on its face. As a student of history, I cannot argue against the need for more participation and instruction in civil discourse, history, and civic education. But I believe the way in which SB117 is structured is improper. Utilizing the power of the General Assembly to force a state government-mandated center into a public university is inappropriate. A state-imposed center would not only lack the internal support from the university but would lack the needed faculty to student connections that ensure interest in such a center would live on. I believe that this would cheapen any benefit that could be taken up by the students that would be participatory in the center's educational goals. A center such as this would forever have an air of illegitimacy compared to the already existing centers on OSU's campus that were homegrown through the engagement of both faculty and students. Trained teachers in the areas of political science, history, and any other aligned subjects should be the ones initiating and cultivating the existence of a center tasked on the goals of, and I quote the bill here, "teaching and research in the historical ideas, traditions, and texts that have shaped the American constitutional order and society". Educated professors are the ones with the direct know-how on the best standards of research and teaching that would best accommodate us as students.

Further adding to the unseemly imposition of the state, is the stipulation that the "advice and consent" of the Senate be sought in order to appoint the proposed council that would govern Chase Center. This would inject partisanship into those slated positions and would again cheapen and add to the academic illegitimacy of the center. Public universities such as OSU should be kept free from the partisanship of state governments in order to ensure that the academic freedom of students is not tainted by politicization. Our education that we are investing in should not be used to score political points for one side or the other. I believe this committee and the General Assembly as a whole should focus less on ensuring their preferred ideological makeup of the student population of higher education across Ohio, and instead hone in on addressing the immediate concerns of students. This could include bolstering scholarship and financial aid funding to ensure that every Ohioan who wants to, is able to afford higher education within the state. This body could also focus on enhancing career development opportunities for recent graduates as a means of keeping as many educated young people in Ohio so they can work fulfilling dignified jobs. And these tasks would be bipartisan in nature and actually assist with turning down the partisan imposition and rhetoric on education that is currently taking place here in our state.

But, although I stand in opposition to the legislation as it stands, just as I stated at the onset I am on the side of more support for historical studies, civics education and more civil discourse across a broad diverse spectrum of students. And I think the General Assembly should have a hand in fostering those stated goals, but with the direct participation of universities, professors and most importantly the students that would stand to benefit from such instruction. This is why I believe that this committee and the General Assembly should focus more on uplifting and funding the centers that already exist on OSU's campus that actually espouse the values and goals that this legislation purports to champion. As a history major, I benefited from the Center for Historical Research through the Department of History. During my time as an undergraduate, I attended multiple events held by CHR specifically on the program that was running at the time 1619 & Beyond: Explorations in Atlantic Slavery and its American Legacy. These events were of keen interest to me personally and academically. Each event included a featured guest that brought in new perspectives along with their own background of research. It was beneficial for me as a student to see how a diverse set of ideas from a diverse set of candidates could be confronted and highlighted. Another center that was homegrown and that already takes lead on the goals that this legislation claims to espouse is the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability. An existing center such this on OSU's campus already fosters a space where broad differing ideological groups come together to focus on the "values of free speech and civil discourse as well as expanding the intellectual diversity of the university's academic community". In fact, in association with the Department of History, the Institute for Democratic Engagement and Accountability presented a two-year program of lectures on the topic of "Democracy in a time of Change and Challenges" that addressed many points that this legislation claims to address. The imposition of the Chase Center would only be an added redundancy on OSU's campus especially given that there already exists a multitude of existing institutes and centers, such as the two that I mentioned as a history major I was able to interact with personally, which are already rich in a mission committed to the stated goals of deepening research on American democratic institutions and furthering "intellectual diversity".

To conclude, I believe that imposing a state-affiliated center, such as the proposed Chase Center, on any university without the direct support and guidance of university professors and students will only seek to politicize and cheapen any stated goals that the center would be tasked with pursuing. Such a center would be looked upon as an aberration of academic freedom, where the state's whims and ideology would be most preferred. Forcing such a center on a university such as OSU is also unnecessary and will only succeed in mimicking the other scholarly work being pursued by both students and faculty on other existing institutions and centers that already have the support of the university's population. I urge a no vote on this legislation. Instead I implore this committee to work with the two targeted universities, both OSU and the University of Toledo College of Law, to bolster already existing centers that would fulfill the stated goals of SB117 all while maintaining the organic full support of the faculty and most importantly the students that would be the ones taking part in the educational endeavors that these centers revolve around.