



17 May 2023

Chairman Young, Ranking Member Miller, Members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Jorge Clavo Abbass, and I am a PhD student in German Applied Linguistics at the Ohio State University. I am before you today in my capacity as the president of the Council of Graduate Students, the officially recognized student government for the over 10,000 graduate students enrolled in approximately 200 programs across all of Ohio State's campuses. I am strongly opposed to HB 151 as it currently stands, as is the graduate student body at Ohio State.

I was born in Venezuela, not long before Hugo Chávez came to power. My family saw the writing on the wall; my father, an engineer, and my mother, a lawyer, foretold the misery, the tyranny, the restrictions on the media, and crucially, the destruction of the academy. My parents always wanted me to have access to the best education possible, because they saw something special in me. And they, like most of us, believed that the United States has the finest education system around, and especially, higher education. They left everything they had built for themselves and everyone they knew to give me the opportunity to pursue a truly free education in this country. They always emphasized to me that in the United States, I could learn inquisitively, without manipulation or indoctrination, without selective interpretation of the facts and with an uncompromising pursuit of the truth and of justice.



In this country, we often think of thought policing as an exclusively leftist strategy, but asphyxiating oversight of universities and the erosion of their autonomy are strategies that have been deployed historically by extremists on the left and right alike. I am here to tell you today that the kinds of changes sought through HB 151 and its counterpart SB 83 are evocative of my personal past and the oppressive regime my family sought refuge from. Additionally, my field of study has required command of German and Austrian philosophy, politics, and history. The gradual erosion of freedom of thought is a concerning parallel I cannot help but draw between the current state of affairs in Florida, the state I grew up in and sought academic refuge from in Ohio, and the National Socialist period.

I want to briefly highlight some of the most problematic aspects of the current legislation before you. Mandatory DEI programs are banned outside specific exemptions. DEI training and programs only benefit every member of the campus. They empower and affirm students and faculty alike from minoritized identities and experiences, and create safer campuses for us all. It is because of such programming that I, an openly gay, multiracial, first generation, low income immigrant, have the ability to speak truth to power and embrace the values this country and this state stand for. And if you find the outcomes of such programming threatening, that says way more about you than it does about me and folks like myself.

Furthermore, although the amendment says that SB 83/HB 151 does not "prohibit faculty or students from classroom instruction, discussion, or debate," it maintains punitive measures for faculty who violate "intellectual diversity". This endangers faculty

who teach on topics like climate change, politics, marriage, abortion, etc., discourages faculty from discussing these topics with students, and undermines existing academic programs, including Black & Ethnic Studies and Gender & Sexuality Studies, and my own field. Concretely for me, as an instructor of record in German language and culture, in my classroom, it is important to discuss the Holocaust, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the way in which German and Austrian society reckon with their pasts, and so on, and it is even more important that my students feel affirmed in my classroom, comfortable enough to ask the hard questions and demonstrate vulnerability. As Governor DeWine stated in a recent op-ed regarding the rise of far-right and anti-Semitic incidents in Ohio and the country, “History is a teacher. We must use it...to educate our young people and remind everyone what Hitler and the Nazis stood for and the atrocities they committed.” This legislation, as it stands, threatens the ability of folks like myself to do so.

Last, SB 83/HB 151 maintains a ban on faculty strikes, which directly implicates the tenure and academic freedom of our professors and graduate students. This ban threatens our freedom to discuss, write, and research, and most impacts the marginalized faculty teaching to the lived experience and knowledge of marginalized students.

The brain drain experienced in Venezuela, and the brain drain now being experienced in Florida, were and are in great part caused by the erosion of academic freedom. The economic impact of this brain drain cannot be understated, and I fear for Ohio’s future were HB 151/SB 83 to pass. The amendments undertaken in SB 83 and soon to be passed for this piece of legislation are a testament to the relevant legislators’ willingness to hear feedback and take into account the significant political, economic, and social costs HB 151 would render upon Ohio and Ohioans. I ask that you continue doing



so. Keep listening to graduate and undergraduate students, educators, and even the Ohio State University Board of Trustees, all of whom vehemently oppose this legislation as it stands. The people affected are the ones who know best. The purpose of good governance is to uphold the values of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. You must understand that HB 151 as it currently stands does anything but.

Respectfully submitted,

Jorge E. Clavo Abbass