



OEC [Action Fund]

Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Chair, Jerry Cirino
Vice Chair, Michael Rulli
SB 83 Opponent Testimony
April 19th, 2023

Thank you Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, and Ranking Member Ingram for the opportunity to provide written testimony in opposition of Senate Bill 83: Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act. The OEC Action Fund's mission is to protect and enhance the environment and the health of all Ohio communities by working to secure healthy air, land, water and democracy.

Senate Bill 83 impacts Ohio's 14 public universities, 23 public community colleges, and a few private institutions. It would limit the institution's ability to discuss a "controversial belief or policy," meaning any belief or policy that is determined to be "subject of political controversy." In this determination, the legislative text notes that this includes electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, abortion, immigration policy, marriage, and climate change. Furthermore, Senate Bill 83 would prohibit any training, professional development, or hiring to learn about these aforementioned topics, and prevents discussion on structural disadvantages based on race or gender identity.

The OEC Action Fund finds that the passage of Senate Bill 83 would be incredibly harmful to higher education across the state. Students, professors, and staff are affected most directly by this stark overhaul in education policy in Ohio. Under this legislation, institutions are forced to encourage students, faculty, and staff to reach their own conclusions on "controversial matters" without facts, discussion, or spaces to cultivate critical thinking and learning. The legislation greatly limits academic freedom of both students and professors, and in turn, hurts the opportunity for collective learning on social injustices we see today in our state and across the country.

There are a number of spillover consequences outside of higher education that would ensue if Senate Bill 83 were passed. Banning discussion on "controversial matters" such as climate change, or even climate change policy, prevents the much-needed critical thinking and education that is needed to both comprehend and combat the climate crisis. Climate change, nor the policy designed to address it should not be considered a political controversy. We need continued public education on climate change if we are to develop sound, pragmatic, and creative solutions to address the climate crisis. This also necessitates an understanding of how structural disadvantages and systemic racism have left communities of color, low income folks, and people with disabilities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.



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Senate Bill 83 would also eliminate a public college or university's ability to create climate action plans and implement sustainability goals. Lines 229 -236 detail that institutions of higher education and their boards cannot "endorse, oppose, comment, or take action, as an institution, on the public policy controversies of the day, or any other ideology, principle, concept, or formulation that requires commitment to any controversial belief or policy, specified concept, or specified ideology." As written, this could prevent major institutions from taking action on sustainability or climate that saves universities money while improving public health and air quality. Climate action plans are important to outlining long-term steps toward decarbonization and comprehensively eliminating greenhouse gas emissions, while supporting communities along the way. Eliminating these emissions at institutions is just another way Ohio can continue to reduce its greenhouse gas footprint as one of the country's top polluters.

Climate change is already impacting the daily lives of Ohioans, whether it'd be public health, critical infrastructure, weather patterns, environmental degradation, and more. This is not an issue that is to be politicized: it is a matter of protecting our collective environmental and human rights for all. There is no questioning that the climate crisis is underway, and aiming to prevent discussion on this major issue of our lifetimes in Ohio's higher education system denies the large archive of research that proves this true. It also refutes the lived realities of those across the states who have already dealt with extreme flooding, severe weather, and record temperatures in their communities. These students who will be witnessing the impacts of climate change intensify during their lifetimes and will be our future leaders working to build a safe, sustainable future for all.

The OEC Action Fund sees Senate Bill 83 as a threat developing equitable solutions to climate change that confront environmental racism and protect the health and safety of all who call Ohio home. Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony today on this important issue to protect higher education and fight climate change.

Sincerely,

Dion Mensah
Energy Justice Fellow
Ohio Environmental Council Action Fund