

Testimony of Emily J. Weglian, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
May 17, 2023

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Rulli, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is Emily J. Weglian, and I am a professor of Anthropology at Cuyahoga Community College, where I have taught for 16 years. I do not represent Cuyahoga Community College, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

I am an Anthropologist, and Anthropologists have a particularly pointed responsibility in educating about concepts of race (which do not exist biologically, but do serve as a socio-political construction) and ethnicity. Unfortunately, Anthropologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were responsible for codifying and building a false “scientific” idea of race that informed the Eugenacists of the early 20th century, who directly impacted the Nazi regime’s ideas of racial purity in the lead up to and during WWII. But the research that supported these ideas was fundamentally flawed on multiple levels, and may have involved purposeful misrepresentation. However, in the early 20th century some Anthropologists conducted research that invalidated many of the claims of the so called “race scientists.” By the second half of the 20th century, research demonstrated that race was not a valid biological concept.

When I first learned this history, I was uncomfortable with the knowledge that a discipline that I love has such darkness in its past. But, now I am committed to teaching students the historical and historic facts surrounding the use of race in both the U.S. and in other countries and cultures in the world. Understanding the history of bias and prejudice that was prevalent within my own discipline is a crucial part in righting the wrongs of the past.

This is a bill that is in search of a problem. Despite the rhetoric, faculty at Ohio Institutions of Higher Learning are not indoctrinating students into one particular worldview. Most faculty are dedicated to providing students with a robust understanding of the world, which includes incorporating information and ideas that might be new to students. This is a crucial part of our educational system—we teach students how to understand multiple points of view, and we teach them how to encounter, engage, and understand information or concepts that might challenge their worldview or expose them to ideas that are completely unknown to them. We do this in a supportive way, in a classroom using deliberate curriculum choices to do our best to equip students with the best critical thinking skills so that they can become better citizens of our country and the world.

This bill also attempts to remove from collective bargaining groups the ability to engage with administrators regarding some of the most important aspects of employment, such as tenure, workload, and faculty evaluations, and give instead sole discretion to the boards of trustees. While I am sure that great care is taken in selecting board members, the reality is that most are not themselves educators and most do not have direct experience in higher education. Such limitations would leave faculty unable to have meaningful and real conversations with administrators about employment issues that are impactful to all.

Perhaps the Committee are not aware of the research that indicates a great many problems with bias in student evaluations. Much like Amazon reviews, they often reflect the most vocal and people on the extremes of their indications of satisfaction for courses, and most negative reviews correlate with grade dissatisfaction.

Senate Bill 83 is a bill that panders to far-right wing constituencies who have deliberately created a panic over content in school and higher education curricula that is largely misunderstood and wildly misrepresented. Banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs and then trying to support “intellectual diversity rights,” is disingenuous. Part of intellectual diversity would include learning about the societal and historical impacts of the societal inequalities of both the past and the present.

Emily J. Weglian, PhD