

Testimony of Jesse Schotter, Associate Professor of English, The Ohio State University
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair
May 16, 2023

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

My name is Jesse Schotter, and I am a professor of English and Film Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for 13 years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

SB 83 attempts to solve a supposed problem that does not actually exist—the suppression of multiple viewpoints on college campuses. But instead of fostering free speech it chills it. By singling out particular topics as “controversial”—abortion, climate change, marriage (!), and foreign policy—and others as “specified concepts”—diversity, social justice, inclusion—it can’t help but make students hesitant to voice their opinion about such vaguely-defined and wide-ranging issues. The bill, I guess, purports to protect students from “indoctrination,” as if I am imposing my viewpoints on my students. But these “controversial” issues are the very topics that students in my classes are clamoring to talk about. Why wouldn’t they be? These are the central issues in society, the central questions of the world they are about to enter. These are in many cases the subjects of the books and films they’re reading and watching in class. They want to talk about these topics, to think critically about them, to hear their classmates’ opinions. These are the moments when class becomes most engaging. This bill puts a damper on discussions of those topics, and without dealing with them, students will be completely unprepared for the world they are entering—jobs, civics, anything. With this bill passed—particularly because of the constant and intentional vagueness of it—I envision a silent classroom. Students (and professors) too intimidated by saying anything controversial that they can say nothing at all. That is not education. That is not what Ohio needs. That is not what the country needs.

Let students learn about their world. Let students learn from each other. Let students learn from their professors. Let students hone their views by debating and testing them. This bill does not protect free speech; it restricts free speech. It does not open up discussion; it closes down discussion. Reject it.