

Testimony of Jason Whitfield, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

May 15, 2023

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

My name is Jason Whitfield, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, and I am an associate professor of Communication Sciences and Disorders in the College of Health and Human Services at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), where I have taught for eight years. I do not represent BGSU but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 83.

After closely reviewing the substitute Senate Bill 83 introduced last week and reviewing opposition testimony offered on the first bill, it is clear to me that the bill remains deeply flawed and undermines important principles such as academic freedom, workers' rights, and institutional autonomy. As a concerned citizen, I urge you to reject this bill in its current form.

The substitute SB 83 imposes unnecessary limitations on diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts within educational institutions. While some exemptions have been introduced, these exemptions must still be approved by the chancellor and only apply to compliance with federal law, licensure, accreditation, grants, or cooperative agreements. These efforts are vital to achieving a diverse and inclusive environment for student to learn and thrive. Additionally, these restrictions undermine the ability of institutions to promote a diverse and inclusive learning environment and hampers efforts to address the needs of all students. Experts on equity and inclusion in higher education argue that full intellectual diversity cannot exist without the full representation and inclusion of groups that have been marginalized and excluded from our spaces.

Furthermore, SB 84 lacks a clear process for addressing allegations of interference related to "intellectual diversity," which will effectively suppress or discourage faculty from discussing so the "specified concepts" outlined in the bill. Placing undue weight on student evaluations in faculty assessments limits the flexibility and academic freedom necessary for effective teaching. Together with the proposed changes post-tenure review, the bill strategically erodes academic freedom, freedom of speech, and job security for faculty members. While I agree that we strive to cultivate a critical consciousness when educating our students, these provisions outlined in SB 83 are not the answer.

Finally, in its current form SB 83 includes various unfunded mandates that will require additional resources without providing any tangible benefits to higher education. This places an

unnecessary burden on educational institutions and diverts valuable resources (i.e., taxpayer dollars and tuition dollars paid by students and families) away from core academic pursuits.

In summary, Senate Bill 83, in its current form, fails to adequately address the concerns raised by stakeholders and represents a regression of fundamental principles in higher education. I implore you to consider the detrimental impact this bill would have on higher education in Ohio. I urge you to reject SB 83 and work towards solutions that prioritize the needs of students, faculty, and educational institutions.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I trust that you will carefully consider the ramifications of SB 83 and make a decision that reflects the best interests of our community and the future of higher education in Ohio.