

Testimony of Adam I. Keller, Ph.D.  
Before the Senate Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair

April 19, 2023

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

My name is Adam Keller, and I am a professor of Chemistry at Columbus State Community College, where I have taught for 16 years. I do not represent Columbus State Community College, but rather am submitting testimony as the President of Columbus State Education Association and as a concerned citizen and lifelong resident.

I am here today as a representative of the Columbus State Education Association and a dedicated faculty member, to express opposition to the proposed Ohio Senate Bill 83. This bill includes numerous requirements which we oppose, including bans on DEI training, bans on higher ed unions striking, limitations on academic freedom, and the erosion of tenure.

Banning requirements for DEI training places our accreditation in jeopardy, and would also make it illegal to use dedicated grant funds to support students and address regional needs within our workforce. For example, state and local grants provided millions of dollars to promote women and People of Color to pursue degrees and careers in engineering and physical sciences, because these groups are under-represented in the workforce. Regional employers in STEM are telling us they need a diverse workforce and the intellectual diversity it provides, with the soft skills needed to operate in a multi-cultural environment, and in a collaborative and respectful manner. I am currently the primary investigator on a grant to recruit women into the engineering workforce, specifically because it is a need among our regional employers. Senate Bill 83 would make it illegal to serve these students, and we will be returning millions of dollars in federal funding to provide student scholarships. We work alongside our regional employers who specifically advise on their needs for a diverse workforce made up of employees who know how to operate in a multicultural environment.

Senate Bill 83 would prevent Columbus State and other community colleges from targeting strategies to help all types of Ohioans (including women, veterans, and racial minorities) access these opportunities and meet employers' requirements for a diverse workforce.

As President of the Columbus State Education Association, it is especially alarming that this bill would make it illegal for college employees to strike. It is critically important for faculty and administration to work together to address issues and solve problems, and provide the best possible learning environment for students. This is not attainable without both parties at the table. The ability for a faculty union to strike is paramount for faculty to protect academic freedom, prevent censorship, ensure due process, improve working conditions, and protect quality education. Most of all competitive wages, benefits, and good working conditions are necessary to attract high quality educators and ensure the best education for students.

In the classroom, this bill has the potential to create a chilling effect on academic discourse. Faculty feel pressured to self-censor or avoid controversial topics out of fear of being targeted,

harassed, or fired. This would be a disservice to our students and the pursuit of knowledge and violates Ohio's Administrative Code, which defines Academic Freedom as the freedom of faculty to "(2) Discuss in classrooms, in their own manner, any material that is relevant to the subject matter as defined in the course syllabus; (3) Exercise their constitutional rights as citizens without institutional censorship or discipline; (4) Seek changes in academic and institutional policies through lawful and peaceful means." The use of "intellectual diversity rubrics" undermines the very academic freedom required by the State of Ohio. Who will decide what constitutes intellectual diversity and when that goal is met? What type of diversity? How do we determine what is both part of the range of American opinion *and* poorly represented on campus?

Finally, we are concerned about the serious erosion of tenure. Using a process as biased as student evaluations of instruction to determine eligibility for post tenure review is another affront to academic freedom. SETs are known to be both biased and a poor measure of student learning. This will disproportionately impact the most disadvantaged professors and reward popularity over teaching effectiveness. It gives substantial power to those with the least experience in effective evaluation of teaching quality.

In the end, we are public servants. We do the work because we believe in the work we do, particularly at a community college. We meet our students where they are, which means we work hard and continuously learn about where they come from, and what challenges they need to overcome to become part of the Ohio workforce. We continuously do more and more every day, every semester, to provide our students with a career path, and the resources and knowledge and skills required to be successful, yet we are doing it with less and less funding and support from our state. The requirements and restrictions put forth in this bill will take dollars away from our mission, and add time to degree completion for in-demand careers, such as nursing and healthcare. Our administration and faculty have a joint commitment to make sure our community has fire fighters, police officers, teachers, health care workers, manufacturing professionals, and this bill does nothing to help with that. But this bill does aim to add millions of dollars of bureaucracy and administrative bloat, and to do so at our own expense in an already severely underfunded enterprise.

In conclusion, the Columbus State Education Association urges you to consider the detrimental impact that Senate Bill 83 would have on our students, our faculty, and our institutions as a whole. We need legislation addressing the cost of college, student debt, declining full time faculty ratios, and support for student retention. We urge you to support higher education, not destroy it.

Sincerely and respectfully,

Adam I. Keller, Ph.D.