

April 12, 2023

Dear Members of the Ohio Senate:

The American Historical Association registers strong objection to Ohio Senate Bill 83. This unwieldy omnibus of contradictory mandates would not only enable but even *require* classroom-level intervention by state officials. This will undermine the integrity of education in Ohio's public universities.

To ensure that faculty "not seek to inculcate any social, political, or religious point of view," SB 83 requires all course syllabi to be reviewed by keyword searches and content management. The AHA agrees that classrooms must be spaces where students can experiment with ideas without worrying about ideological boundaries, places where teachers stimulate students to explore freely without "inculcating" anything other than the value of intellectual curiosity and disciplinary rigor and ethics. State oversight of this kind, scrutinizing content at the microscopic level of keywords, smacks less of guaranteeing the ideological diversity cited in the legislation than government surveillance more closely resembling the Soviet Union or Communist China than a public university system in the United States.

One wonders what the overseers will be looking for. Any respectable course in US history will include references to racism, white supremacy, nativism, class conflict, forced migrations, and other terms likely to raise eyebrows of guardians of a version of history devoid of conflict and division. Freedom, innovation, liberty, democracy, dissent, markets, and other concepts that characterize admirable aspects of our national past would also be part of that course.

American history is steeped in divisions and conflicts shaped by ideas about race and by cultures and institutional structures that perpetuate those divisions. **This is fact, not theory or ideology.** To ignore, or even minimize, those divisions renders it impossible to create the bridges and webs of connection necessary to maintain national unity. To heal wounds requires acknowledging, locating, and understanding them.

Healing, however, is not the purpose of this legislation. Couched in barely concealed euphemisms, the bill enforces an education that whitewashes the history of our nation and its people. Sidelineing such central issues as slavery, forced removals of Native Americans, and inequalities based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other characteristics excludes material likely to inspire the vigorous discussion that characterizes a good history class. If a college instructor cannot assign material that will make students "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex," as SB 83 dictates, how are students to understand what it meant for some people to legally own, buy, and sell other humans, and others to experience enslavement, commodification, and everyday violations of their very humanity? The past is filled with decisions, relationships, and events that can easily make us feel uncomfortable about our predecessors. A good history instructor makes it

clear that nobody in the class should feel responsible for what their ancestors did. But only by understanding what happened in the past can the students work to shape a better future.

Though this legislation might appear to respond to public concerns about history education, it does not. Professional, nonpartisan survey data indicate overwhelming and bipartisan public support for what most history educators actually teach on this subject: that slavery and racism have played a key role in shaping American history, and that their influence reverberates into the present. According to a recent national survey ([historians.org/history-culture-survey](https://historians.org/history-culture-survey)) conducted by the AHA and Fairleigh Dickinson University, three-quarters of both Republicans and Democrats support teaching history about “harm that some groups did to others,” even if it causes students some discomfort.

**SB 83 would do significant harm to college students and employers in Ohio.** Through extensive work on career preparedness in history classrooms, the AHA has documented that the aspect of history education employers value most is students’ ability to communicate with and understand people from different backgrounds.

SB 83, however, is not only a danger to the quality of history education. It poses a threat to public higher education itself. It would inappropriately inject university boards of trustees into decisions about faculty hiring and work responsibilities—an intrusion across the boundary of governance and management in any nonprofit entity. Similarly, the bill would replace evidence-based locally designed teaching and research evaluations with procedures and rubrics created by state officials, raising additional concerns about political intrusions on academic freedom.

With more than 11,000 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the imperative of historical thinking in public life.

Everything has a history. If passed, SB 83 would undermine the quality of public higher education in Ohio by preventing qualified instructors from teaching honest and accurate history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James Grossman  
Executive Director