

Testimony of Ryan Skinner, Ph.D.
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
March 11, 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Ryan Skinner. I am a Professor of Music and African American and African Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for nearly fifteen years. I do not represent Ohio State but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

On Wednesday, February 12, the Ohio Senate passed Senate Bill 1, despite bi-partisan opposition and without consideration of the over one thousand faculty, students, community members who submitted opposition testimony to the Senate Higher Education Committee.

SB1 proposes sweeping changes to higher education in Ohio, with myriad provisions that would erode academic freedom, surveil curriculum, dismantle tenure, and curtail faculty unions.

But is this indictment of the academy justified? Not in the least. SB1's sponsors and supporters pay no heed to the success of higher education in Ohio, and the reason is simple: Attending to the excellence and accomplishments of university educators undermines the case for SB1.

Proponents of SB1 are dour in their assessment of public universities. Faculty, we are told, "indoctrinate" students, and campuses suppress "intellectual diversity" by promoting (without any sense of contradiction or irony) diversity, equity, and inclusion, or "DEI." Indeed, the bill's sponsors call DEI programming "discriminatory," without considering the important work such programs do to support students or the many benefits of DEI to the economy and society at large.

Acrimony begets antagonism. One of the provisions of SB1 requires that course syllabi be made publicly available and searchable by keywords on university websites. While such a provision appears, at first glance, justifiable in terms of transparency, it is rooted in a deep suspicion and resentment of faculty. Detailed faculty profiles are already available and accessible online, so why publish our syllabi? The answer, I suspect, is to expose faculty to trolling and harassment, and to encourage self-censorship through the specter of surveillance.

Another bogeyman in the bill is faculty organization. SB1 sets strict limits to collective bargaining and bans strikes at public institutions. Here, again, faculty appear as villains, conspiring to disrupt university business and the all-important bottom line. Yet we know that unions strengthen higher education by improving working conditions for teaching and learning. Unions benefit faculty and students alike. They are not the enemy.

But to make their case, proponents of SB1 need an enemy, and faculty are convenient targets. Students, too. When SB1 was announced at the Statehouse on January 22, a group of students

showed up to protest. State Senator Jerry Cirino, the bill's chief sponsor, dismissed the gathering, claiming that students were "probably getting extra credit" for expressing their civic rights.

That's the negative story, of a rogue faculty and their brainwashed students who need swift and severe discipline. As a colleague noted in their opposition testimony to the bill, the phrase "shall not" appears more the three dozen times in the legislation, followed close thereafter by the word "prohibit." SB1 is punitive by design.

But there's another story we could tell, one which proponents of SB1 expressly ignore. That story tells of the remarkable achievements of our public universities, of the excellent work that makes Ohio higher education truly great.

Let me give a few examples from my workplace, The Ohio State University. We are, of course, national champions in football, but we are also home to Nobel laureates in physics! We have produced dozens of Guggenheim fellows, Fulbright scholars, Pulitzer Prize winners, and, in 1993, a MacArthur Fellow. Many of our faculty members serve on prestigious national academies. The distinctions are too numerous to survey, which is itself impressive.

We are also a top-ranked institution nationally. In 2025, the U.S. News and World Report ranks Ohio State 15th among public universities in the U.S. and 41st overall. More fine-grained, Ohio State is ranked 8th among public universities for "Best Global University for Arts and Humanities in the United States." We have top 20 programs in engineering, political science, agriculture, management, and accounting, and our Bachelor of Science in nursing is ranked 4th in the nation!

Awards and rankings are one thing, seeing this all play out first-hand is another. My job affords me the opportunity to witness the transformative work undertaken by faculty throughout the university. My colleagues include computer engineers and sociologists, literary scholars and lab scientists, artists and anthropologists, historians and librarians. Through collaborative projects, community engagement, student mentorship, and shared governance, I can testify to profound impact these people are making on the present and future of Ohio, our nation, and the world every day.

What a shame it is to tell a story about higher education in Ohio that ignores all of this; that effaces the hard work, achievement, and honor of devoting one's career to public university education in our great state. SB1 tells the wrong story.

I strongly encourage members of this committee to vote "No" on SB1.

Ryan Skinner, Ph.D.