

Testimony of Melissa Clark, MSc., PhD  
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 Melissa Clark, and I am a professor of biological anthropology at Cleveland State University, where I have taught for four years. I am soon to be employed at Cuyahoga Community College. I have also taught at the Ohio State University, where I earned my doctorate, and Columbus State Community College. I do not represent any of these institutions, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen.

First, I believe that students absolutely must maintain their right to vote on the Board of Trustees. Why should they not have a say in a committee that is ostensibly designed to serve in their best interest? Would you not want their input? I see no reason to exclude them from voting except to silence those voices that you feel go against your personal opinions, ideology, and financial gain.

Second I challenge your definition of controversial beliefs or policies. As you are well aware, climate change is not a belief, it is a fact. The impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion programs is a fact. All of what you have listed in section 3345.0217 are facts. Unicorns, magic, ghosts, and faith are all beliefs; you are therefore mistaken in your definition. We already invite our students to form their own opinions about the policies that deal with facts, which you would know if you set foot in our classrooms even once instead of listening without question to the leaders of your party. I invite you to consult my syllabi for evidence of this practice.

Third, it is abhorrent that you would even consider prohibiting orientation and training in DEI and banning these programs. As I am sure you are already aware (or you would be if you had any training in education whatsoever), students succeed academically when they feel like they belong. Numerous studies have found that if a student perceives they are in a welcoming environment, they are much more likely to succeed not only in that class, but in persisting to the end of their program of study. I am happy to provide you with the citations to back up this claim should you require.

In banning DEI programs, you are assuming that all pre-collegiate education programs in Ohio are equal. In that assumption, committee members, you are wrong. Just yesterday I sat with a student for two hours teaching her how to change verb tenses and identify root words. I teach a college science class. Even so, it is not uncommon for my students to enter my classroom with an 8<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, not because they don't want to learn, but because you and every

other person who created and upheld this inequitable system have failed them. Time and time again, it is the same story- they went to school in East Cleveland, were given A's for simply attending, and enter college functionally illiterate. They describe schools with water damage, buildings falling into disrepair, and minimal climate control. Yet, they come to college willing to learn, to better themselves and their communities. I need diversity training to know how to effectively teach people whose life experiences differ so much from my own.

If you continue with your ban on DEI, I can only assume this means that you will pour money into our public school systems so that the even playing field you think exists will come to fruition and ALL children and young adults will have an equal chance of success in college. If you plan to move forward with this bill, I have the following expectations:

- 1) You will work to actively desegregate our suburbs and school districts
- 2) You will fund programs that support Black home ownership in historically redlined neighborhoods to drive property taxes into those school districts.
- 3) You will create and sponsor a plan to equitably allocate funding across zip codes.
- 4) You will support school lunch programs.
- 5) You will fund test preparation for all students.
- 6) You will create (or preferably, find a committee of actual educators to create) a school-to-college or trade pipeline, giving all students an equal chance of success.

Are you planning to make these changes? If not, then you have no place passing this bill.

Regards,  
Melissa