

Oppositional Testimony Against SB1/HB6 Legislation in Ohio

Chairperson and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in opposition to the proposed House Bill 6. My name is Lauren Colley, and I am a professor in secondary social studies education at the University of Cincinnati. I come before you today not only as an educator and researcher, but as an advocate for Ohio's schools and its economic and workforce development. This legislation threatens to directly undermine Ohio's efforts to become the "Silicon Valley of the Midwest", jeopardizing our ability to attract businesses, cultivate a competitive workforce, and create a knowledgeable citizenry.

The Economic Impact of Higher Education in Ohio

The University of Cincinnati and UC Medical Center represent the largest economic engine in Southwest Ohio. Ohio's research universities are vital to our innovation, workforce development, and the overall economic health of the state. Policies and legislation such as HB6 that hinder research, restrict curriculum, and interfere with admissions and retention will significantly weaken the university's ability to fulfill its mission and drive economic progress.

We already have the blueprint for what will happen to Ohio if this legislation passes. For example, Oklahoma's recent passage of anti-DEI legislation has already begun to show negative impacts on workforce and economic growth. Similar legislation in Ohio would deter businesses that prioritize diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, making it more difficult for the state to compete nationally and globally. Ohio's aspirations to become an economic leader in the Midwest depend on its ability to attract top-tier talent—both in academia and industry. Passing HB6 will send a clear message that Ohio is not welcoming to diverse professionals and students, ultimately stifling innovation and economic growth.

Workforce Implications and Educational Attainment

Moreover, Ohio's ability to attract and retain employment hinges on increasing the educational attainment of its workforce. According to the Ohio Department of Higher Education's 2019 Attainment Report, "Ohio's ability to attract and retain jobs is the key to our state's economic future and hinges on the educational attainment levels of

our citizenry." In 2017, Ohio set an ambitious goal that 65% of Ohioans ages 25-64 would have a degree, certificate, or other postsecondary credential by 2025. Since then, educational attainment has increased by nearly 15%, but significant gaps remain, particularly for historically marginalized groups.

Data from the Ohio Department of Higher Education's 2023 Attainment Report and the 2022 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census Bureau highlight concerning disparities:

- The unemployment rate for Black Ohioans is 8.5%, with Black individuals aged 20-24 experiencing an unemployment rate of 15.9%—more than double the 6.8% rate for all Ohioans in that age group.
- Only 30% of Black Ohioans have obtained a postsecondary degree, compared to 41% for all Ohioans.
- Educational attainment among different racial groups varies widely, with a 39% difference between the highest (Asian and Pacific Islander) and lowest (African American) degree-earning groups.

HB 6 Will Deter College Enrollment and Economic Growth

Ohio still lags behind the national average for postsecondary educational attainment (52.3% vs. 54.3%). Policies that restrict diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility will discourage prospective students from enrolling in Ohio's institutions, further exacerbating this gap. A CollegeIQ study found that state laws restricting DEI efforts influence where high school students choose to attend college:

- 77% of surveyed prospective students say these laws will impact their decision.
- 69% of surveyed prospective students prefer states and institutions without DEI restrictions.
- 56% of Republican-identifying students who say these laws significantly impact their choice prefer states and institutions without DEI restrictions.

Furthermore, a BestColleges survey further found that 75% of undergraduate and graduate students FAVOR having diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility support on campuses, while only 26% support legislative efforts to limit DEI promotion. In particular, Black students are much more likely to be influenced by DEI laws in their college selection process.

Investing in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Strengthens Ohio's Economy

The benefits of increasing postsecondary enrollment extend beyond individual students. Higher educational attainment results in:

- A larger tax base for Ohio.
- Reduced reliance on state social welfare programs.
- A workforce that attracts businesses and supports industry growth.

For Ohio to meet its workforce needs and economic goals, it must maintain policies that encourage diversity and inclusion. According to the Ohio Department of Higher Education, "For Ohio employers to prosper in a global economy, they must have world-class talent with verifiable knowledge and skills aligned with specific workplace needs." Restricting higher education will make it harder for Ohio to produce this talent and will ultimately hinder job creation and economic expansion.

Investing in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Strengthens Ohio's Citizenry

As a social studies educator, I know first hand the impact of educating students to become informed and active citizens in our democracy. A large component of this work is increasing postsecondary educational attainment. The Ohio Department of Higher Education notes that their 3rd strategy to achieve the 65% attainment goal is "to continue Ohio's investment in college access, affordability, and workforce alignment, with special attention given to programs that support economically disadvantaged students, adult learners, and students of color." Higher education institutes cannot achieve this goal with limitations upon programs, curriculum, and scholarships that surround diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility.

Moreover, the calls within HB6 to force institutions to teach things such as "both sides of history" does not create classrooms where students can develop their critical thinking, but instead creates space for things such as Holocaust denial and anti-American conversations to occur. For example, in order to tell "both sides of history" in the American revolution, you must then also be teaching that colonists should have been content and supportive of King George, his taxation measures, and their own lack of representation in parliament. Not only are these ideas historically inaccurate, but they do nothing to promote true critical thinking of our student

population. Our democracy was founded by the ideals within the American Revolution and those should be cherished, not diminished.

Also, by limiting “controversial topics” in higher education curriculum and classrooms, HB 6 seeks to establish a citizenry that is unaware of current events, and that limits their ability to engage with the most pressing issues facing the needs of Ohioans. We cannot grow a citizenry and economy without academic freedom.

Conclusion

The data are clear: Ohio’s future economic prosperity depends on fostering an educated and diverse workforce. HB 6 will not only diminish educational opportunities for underrepresented students but will also deter businesses from investing in Ohio. If Ohio truly aims to become a leader in technological innovation and economic development, it must embrace policies that support diversity, equity, and inclusion—not dismantle them.

I urge the committee to reject this harmful legislation and instead invest in policies that will position Ohio for long-term economic and educational success.

Thank you for your time and consideration.



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