

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the Ohio House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for accepting my testimony in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1.

My name is Danielle Firsich, and I am the Director of Public Policy for Planned Parenthood Advocates of Ohio and Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio. Senate Bill 1 would increase censorship at colleges and universities and weaken our education standards, particularly for medical students learning sexual and reproductive health care.

A letter written by medical students in the Columbus Dispatch outlined such concerns:

“The medical field is far more than just scientific facts and clinical procedures; it involves the deeply personal, emotional, and vulnerable aspects of patient care that require nuance and compassion. To become truly empathetic and capable physicians, it is crucial for us to receive exposure to different perspectives that shape our understanding of patients’ lives and cultural contexts, allowing us to provide better healthcare to our diverse communities. The prospect of visiting a doctor's office is already intimidating— now imagine the added anxiety of dealing with a medical team that is completely out of touch with your background and experiences. Our dedication to representation is not driven by political agendas but by an earnest desire to create an environment where patients can safely seek care without fear of judgment or condescension.”¹

This body frequently--and inappropriately--inserts itself into state policy in a manner that aligns with the limited, biased, and misinformed viewpoint of a select few. This is in its essence the exact *opposite* of academic freedom, as the government forces its limited views on academia and further seeks to control citizens in the same way it attempts to control our sexual and reproductive lives. I find it ironic that legislators who ensure that Ohio’s youth receive “abstinence-only education” instead of anything resembling a thoughtful, fact-based or comprehensive curriculum, are decrying the lack of “academic freedom” and “diversity of thought” in Ohio universities.

How can this bill demand that institutions of higher education “ensure full intellectual diversity” while simultaneously--and paternalistically--dictating to them what “controversial beliefs or policies” they cannot support or oppose? By what metric was it determined that “climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion” are too inherently controversial or divisive to merit academic engagement? What is this, but selective and extensive government overreach?

This bill goes further than its predecessor, SB83—a bill that garnered record Statehouse opposition throughout its hearing process. SB83 would have prohibited mandatory DEI programs, while this bill eliminates them entirely. This strips students of both choice and agency and sends the message that Ohio universities are not dedicated to or invested in a diverse culture that provides meaningful community for historically underrepresented students. I cannot help but note that the moniker that conservatives have attributed to DEI as 'Didn't Earn It' is especially farcical when you consider that the supermajority of this body only has their seats because their district was rigged to virtually guarantee it. Can you truly say you currently inhabit your seat because you were the most experienced, qualified, or deserving in a diverse pool of candidates?

I take issue with this bill's widespread efforts to threaten job security, academic freedom, and critical research and organizing opportunities that add to the value of higher education and institutional knowledge in our sacred places of higher learning. The right to established tenure allows for dissent and freedom of thought and speech without fear of reprisal or retaliation from universities that wield enormous power and influence—something you would think the writers of this bill would favor in their pursuit to eliminate certain dominant cultures within our education system. The faculty strike ban was also removed from the previous version of this bill but has been reincorporated into this one—eliminating a vital tool for negotiation, addressing power imbalances at large, well-funded public institutions, and addressing vitally important issues like pay inequity, working conditions, or adverse treatment.

Those working in universities deserve the ability to self-advocate, and to demand that their working conditions and environment are conducive to their physical, mental and emotional wellness, as well as their ability to provide the highest quality education to their students. Faculty strikes are not engaged in upon a whim—they are usually the result of long-term grievances regarding insufficient resources, administrative negligence or failure of management, and declining quality of pay, benefits, and workplace environment. Ohio ranks 40th nationwide in population growth and faces both a rapidly declining and aging populace—at a time when “workforce attraction” is such a predominant focus, I struggle to understand why we are making it so difficult for so many people to live, work and thrive in our state.

Diversity, equity and inclusion has its roots in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which barred employment discrimination based on race, color, sex, religion and other criteria. How are we strengthening our institutions by dismantling decades-long efforts to address systemic inequalities, and defying a movement that was built upon the backs of those who faced generations of discrimination, violence, and unfounded prejudice? Contrary to claims that DEI initiatives foster and encourage a “discriminatory” environment, empirical evidence continues to show that these measures result in improved employee engagement, retention, innovation, and overall organizational performance. Labeling DEI as some form of “institutionalized discrimination” is laughably disingenuous, as it ignores the core facet of the systems DEI seeks to remediate: the inequitable distribution of power.

DEI is not a method to simply “check a box” or meet some form of racialized or gendered quota in hiring methods—it seeks to rebalance institutional and socioeconomic power to ensure that those who have been historically disempowered or deprived of equal opportunities simply because of their identities finally have a fair and equitable chance to succeed. As the common saying goes, equal rights for others does not mean fewer rights for you--it's not pie. Creating equitable structures that grant equal rights to everyone does not take away from the rights of the longstanding majority. DEI, at its core, benefits *everyone*:

“One of the most popular claims made by anti-DEI advocates is that DEI only benefits certain groups—usually people of color, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. DEI initiatives seek to ensure that everyone has what they need to succeed, regardless of their identity. Stronger parental leave policies ensure that parents of all genders can take the time they need to bond with their new babies. Accessible entrances benefit people pushing children in strollers, elderly folks with mobility issues, or people with disabilities.

Stronger employee support programs help military veterans transition back into civilian life and receive adequate mental health support. DEI recognizes that many different communities experience barriers to success and seeks to remove them so that everyone can thrive, resulting in happier employees, higher quality work, and less turnover.”²

Why does this legislative body decry the state of our public institutions after having nearly complete control of our statewide government for decades, siphoning over \$1 billion from public to private schools, and continually pushing policies that marginalize entire communities and contribute to an industry-wide brain drain? Politicians are not experts in educational best practice, and I encourage you to entrust our institutions of higher learning--and those living and working within them—to create and maintain a system that provides quality, fact-based education to all. Please vote no on Senate Bill 1.

Thank you, and I will now take any questions you may have.

¹<https://www.dispatch.com/story/opinion/columns/guest/2023/09/27/what-impact-would-ohio-senate-bill-83-have-on-student-doctors-patients/70910680007/>

²<https://www.ywboston.org/didnt-earn-it-and-other-lies-dei-myths-debunked/>