

Testimony of Emily Dringenberg, PhD  
Before the Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Representative Tom Young, Chair  
Date March 11, 2025

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

My name is Emily Dringenberg, and I am an Associate Professor of Engineering Education at The Ohio State University - Columbus, where I have worked for 8 years. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

Please consider my testimony in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1, a bill that, if passed, will ultimately undermine our ability to hold ourselves and one another accountable to justify our decisions on social issues when those decisions impact others.

I am in full agreement that we should all be 1) expected to consider multiple and divergent perspectives, and 2) allowed the freedom to decide for ourselves what “belief” or position we will commit to. This process of weighing evidence and being allowed to come to our own conclusions is fundamental to our lives as members of a democratic nation. But this bill fails to make a distinction between our individual rights as citizens and the responsibilities we hold as leaders and professionals. As engineering faculty members, we are responsible for educating the next generation of engineers and researchers whose professional decisions directly impact the citizens of Ohio and the world. Just like any other professional, engineers must be held to account to *justify* our decisions. The oversight in this bill will prohibit those of us working in higher education from holding one another and our students accountable to justify our decisions despite the potentially negative impact of these decisions on others. I’ll provide some examples to illustrate my concern.

As parents, we get to decide on the policy that governs bedtime for our kids. This decision is an opportunity to engage intellectual diversity and commit to a controversial belief. For example, we consider evidence from perspectives including: how I was raised, how my partner was raised, what is written in parenting books, research on child development, what my friends are doing with their kids, what feels right to each of us, my partner’s preferences and the opinions of our kids on the matter. This evidence informs the decision; our current policy is that kids have to be in their beds by 7:30pm. This decision is a controversial commitment! If you don’t think so, I suspect you’ve never been responsible for bedtime. I am steadfast in my commitment to this “controversial belief” because I am able to justify my position to myself and to my kids. Here, “because I said so” is an option. Yet, I hold myself accountable to be able to justify my decision, because it impacts the lives of at least two other people.

As engineers, we influence the design of the systems and infrastructure of our modern world. Again, we have the same basic process: engage in intellectual diversity and commit to a design. For example, consider an engineer who works to design high voltage transmission lines in Ohio. That engineer is required to engage a variety of divergent perspectives such as: the results of their own models and calculations, the reality of existing designs, professional standards and regulations, user needs, environmental impact, manufacturing costs, and so on. Engineering designs are a part of our social world, so they always have competing interests from a variety of stakeholders. Therefore, by nature, engineering designs are always “controversial”...at least to some degree. Engineers are not and cannot be allowed to freely commit to a design without question. *Especially* when that design intersects with controversial public policy! We must hold engineers accountable to be able to justify their design to ensure the safety and welfare of the public, among other things [1]. So, as someone who educates engineers and

researchers, it is not enough to expect my students to engage with diverse perspectives and then make a design decision. No. We are responsible for developing students' ability to *justify* their design decisions. The idea of prohibiting debate around controversial issues related to policy is a slippery slope. Where is the line between the controversy of public policy and of engineering designs? Who gets to decide what's controversial? As I see it, if this bill becomes law and we cannot hold students or one another accountable to justify our positions related to public policy, then we lose our ability to hold our engineers accountable to justify their design decisions. Then, we become unable to develop competent engineers, we erode the trustworthiness of our profession, and we stall technological contributions to societal problems. Why are we entertaining a bill with such great risk? The only reason I see is that it provides a loophole to excuse other professionals in positions of power from being held to account to justify their decisions. I ask you: is that the case for those of you planning to vote in favor of this bill?

As policy makers, we have elected you all to advance the policies that govern our state. Not unlike engineers or researchers, you are each responsible for making judgements in a context where there is no right or wrong answer and when engaging "intellectual diversity" means that your decision will inevitably be judged more or less favorably by a variety of stakeholders. It's a hard job and a big responsibility. If we can agree that engineers should have to justify their designs, then why can't we agree that when someone's position on a controversial public policy affects others, we should require justification? Where else in society is the chance to practice engaging diverse perspectives, committing to a position, and then systematically justifying that position protected if not in higher education? We must continue to hold ourselves and one another accountable to justify our positions on social issues, regardless of any perceived controversy in our personal and professional roles. By attacking our ability to do so in higher education, this bill is a threat to systematic thinking more broadly and our democracy. If we can't fact check in higher education, where can we fact check? This bill's contribution to a social reality where facts do not matter and justification isn't expected is unacceptable.

So, I close by asking that you each hold yourself accountable to the same standard to which I hold myself and my students. Consider the evidence. Commit to your decision. And justify it. I urge you to vote against this bill because of the evidence I've provided in this testimony. Also because of the negative economic impact such a move will have on our state. Ohio State University alone contributes \$19 million annually to our state budget and supports nearly 117,000 jobs [2]. This bill will damage our reputation and the quality of our research and teaching. Also because researchers show that similar legislation in other states is having negative impacts: capital market investors withdraw, students become harder to recruit, and the mental health and engagement of faculty members is weakened [3, 4, 5]. Most importantly, you should reject this bill because your key stakeholder, the people of Ohio, have spoken. At the Senate hearings for this bill, there were 14 testimonies in favor of this bill. There were 1,011 testimonies against it. That's some pretty strong evidence from the people who elected you. If I had 14 other parents who supported my 7:30pm bedtime policy and 1,011 who begged me to reconsider, I would reconsider. So if you intend to vote in favor of this bill, I urge you to reconsider. If you will vote in favor anyway, I ask: how do you justify that commitment to yourself and to the people of Ohio?

With care,

Emily Dringenberg

## References Cited

1. <https://www.nspe.org/career-growth/nspe-code-ethics-engineers>
2. <https://erik.osu.edu/sites/default/files/documents/2022/09/Economic%20Impact%20Study%20FINAL.pdf>
3. Briscoe-Tran, Hoa, Do investors value DEI? Evidence from the Stop WOKE Act (June 13, 2024). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4865475> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4865475>
4. <https://www.aacr.org/blog/2023/10/02/the-florida-factor-disparities-research-in-the-face-of-anti-dei-laws/>
5. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/anti-dei-laws-higher-ed/#:~:text=Overall%2C%20these%20faculty%20members%20report%20that%20the,to%20report%20them%20for%20violating%20anti%20DEI%20laws.>