

Testimony of Susan E. Cole, Ph.D.

Before the House Workforce & Higher Education Committee

Senator Tom Young, Chair

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Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the House Workforce & Higher Education Committee,

I thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding Senate Bill 1/House Bill 6. My name is Susan Cole, and I am a professor of Molecular Genetics at The Ohio State University. Today I do not represent OSU, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1. However, my testimony is informed by over 20 years of service as a faculty member at OSU and, more recently as the Chair of the Department of Molecular Genetics. I appreciate this opportunity to speak in opposition to the proposed legislation. Despite the title of the bill, enacting this legislation will not “advance” higher education in Ohio but will instead contribute to its downfall: undermining Ohio’s efforts to attract and retain a talented workforce; wasting state money; degrading free expression; and inhibiting the preparation and retention of workers in the state of Ohio.

As written, Senate Bill 1, even given the changes in the Substitute Bill, covers an overwhelming terrain, addressing issues as varied as the right to strike, tenure protections, “bias” in the classroom, mandatory DEI trainings, partnerships with Chinese institutions, and mandatory coursework/reading in American government and history, among others. There is not time or space to address all of my concerns regarding this bill, though in today’s testimony, I have no doubt you will hear from opponents in all of these areas. Today I will focus on the most salient concerns for me.

First, I would address the bill’s concerns surrounding controversial beliefs. Many of the proposals in SB1 are grounded in the mistaken belief that discussions in university classrooms are designed to indoctrinate students into a specific viewpoint regarding so-called controversial beliefs. My experience in my own classroom (where I actively discuss the intersections of genetics and social policy), and in observing the classrooms of my peers, shows that faculty at Ohio universities are already deeply engaged in supporting students in thoughtful discussions around topics where reasonable people disagree. Passage of Senate Bill 1 will not, in fact, promote broader discussions that engage diverse viewpoints surrounding these topics. It will instead have a chilling effect, ensuring that these topics will not be discussed at all, as faculty try to determine how what they are teaching intersects with the undefined concept of a “controversial” belief, and fear the kind of retribution we have seen in other states. This provides a legislative barrier to OSU’s commitment to “Education for Citizenship” and will lead to a world where our students enter the workforce at a disadvantage, without the intellectual tools needed to (as stated in line 683) “reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs.”

Second, I want to state again that the bill’s concerns about “intellectual diversity” and “Diversity, Inclusion and Equity” are in direct conflict. The whole point of considering “Diversity, Equity,

and Inclusion” is not to indoctrinate our students with a specific viewpoint, but instead to increase the participation and expression of those with diverse viewpoints and beliefs within the context of higher education. This strengthens intellectual input from those who are not routinely included in the public discourse including, for example, students from rural areas and from reduced economic backgrounds, and veterans. How can we expect to expose our students to the concerns of these groups if they are not supported in taking a place at the table, and how do we support them without considering equitable ways to include diverse backgrounds and intellectual viewpoints at the table?

Critically, passage of this legislation will have a chilling effect on the recruitment and retention of the very workers who support the state of Ohio economy. Every day I hear from colleagues and from students who plan to move out of Ohio, motivated in part by the concerns that the state legislature actively opposes the work that they do and the people that they are. I have personally spoken with students, staff, and faculty candidates who have declined to apply for education and employment opportunities in Ohio or have actively sought to move to other states out of fear of the consequences of legislation like Senate Bill 1. At the most fundamental level, passage of this bill will undermine the state education system and the state economy, with consequences that will reach decades into the future.

It is also true that Senate Bill 1 is at its core an unnecessary and fiscally irresponsible piece of legislation. Many of its mandates are presently in place. Students in Ohio and across the country are already required to complete coursework in U.S. History and Government, and this requirement is further supported by existing general education requirements at OSU, along with the recent creation of the Chase Center for Civics, Culture, and Society. Similarly, all universities in Ohio already collect and make available course syllabi, regularly review faculty (even post-tenure), and offer students the opportunity to evaluate instruction in every course they take. In recent efforts to revise the student feedback This means that many of the requirements of Senate Bill 1 will actually increase the cost of a college education for our students. Requiring the reorganization and administration of these requirements is a clear example of unnecessary government overreach and fiscal irresponsibility that threatens the fiscal stability of our higher education system and our state.

I am going to close by quoting an essay published on the website of the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression in Education (FIRE). This group is not one that is always sympathetic to the concerns of faculty, and it actively supports conservative voices on campuses. But even this group has spoken out against legislation like SB1. In a March 4<sup>th</sup> essay, FIRE’s Executive Director Robert Shibley reminded us all that “Faculty members are supposed to be hired *because* they are subject-matter experts who have the ability and knowledge in the field to make informed academic judgments.” He closed that essay stating that “Even if one believes a particular group of public college faculty is, itself, making decisions that harm higher education, [...] there’s one thing we can know for sure: transferring that job to politicians will only make it worse.”

I urge the members of this Committee to stand up for intellectual diversity and support the economic underpinning of the state of Ohio through their rejection of Senate Bill 1.