

Testimony in Opposition to SB 1– Enact Advance Ohio Higher Education Act

Testimony of Holly Clemens, Ph.D., LMT
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Rep. Tom Young, Chair
March 11, 2025

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

I appreciate the opportunity to testify in strong opposition to SB 1, the so-called "Enact Advance Ohio Higher Education Act." My name is Holly Clemens, and I recently retired as a Professor of Health, Physical Education, and Sport & Exercise Studies at Cuyahoga Community College after 35 years of service. I have recently returned to the college as an adjunct faculty. I do not represent Cuyahoga Community College but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to SB 1. I am deeply concerned that this bill will undermine the very principles of academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and quality education to students that define higher learning in our state.

Politicization of Higher Education

Ohio's colleges and universities have long thrived under a system that allows faculty governance and institutional independence to shape academic priorities. SB 1 shifts control of Ohio's higher education system from faculty, students, and academic experts to government appointees. This shift risks turning universities into politically controlled institutions rather than places of independent thought and research. Legislators should trust educators—those with expertise in their fields—to determine curricula and research priorities, rather than impose politically motivated mandates. Students deserve an education based on facts, research, and scholarly inquiry—not political agendas.

Consequences for Students and Workforce Development

Ohio's students deserve an education that prepares them for an increasingly complex and diverse world. Higher education should cultivate independent thinking, problem-solving, and innovation—skills that employers value. By restricting certain topics or perspectives, SB 1 risks limiting students' exposure to the broad range of ideas necessary for critical engagement and professional success. This is especially true in the healthcare profession.

Additionally, the requirement for a 3-credit hour "civics" course may send many Health Career curricula over the maximum number of allowed credits for an Associate of Applied Science or Bachelor of Science Degree. This would require the elimination of an existing course and could negatively impact accreditation for many of these Health Career programs, including nursing, radiology, respiratory and others. If a Health Career AAS or BS degree is from an institution that has questionable or no accreditation, a student will not be eligible for federal financial aid, not be able to transfer credits to another school, and not be able to obtain appropriate professional licensure in their field. What is an end result? Our largest healthcare employers, such as the Cleveland Clinic and University Hospitals, will question the validity of a student's degree and their potential as a good job candidate. What is another end result? Students will look for healthcare jobs outside our state and it is well documented that Ohio is confronting a severe healthcare shortage, especially in nursing.

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Negative Impact on Student Experience and University Reputation

I worry about the long-term consequences of SB 1. If Ohio's universities are seen as places where political ideology dictates curriculum rather than academic excellence, students will choose to attend institutions in other states. This will weaken our universities' reputations, leading to lower enrollment, reduced research funding, and fewer opportunities for students.

Threat to Academic Freedom

Another concern with SB 1 is its attempt to impose top-down control over what is taught in universities. Higher education should be a place where students are exposed to diverse perspectives and encouraged to think critically. However, by restricting certain topics or mandating specific ideological content, SB 1 undermines the purpose of education itself. This bill could prevent professors from teaching history, politics, and social issues in a way that encourages open debate and critical thinking, leaving students with an incomplete understanding of the world.

Impact on Faculty Retention and Recruitment

By constraining academic freedom and increasing political oversight, SB 1 will make Ohio's institutions less attractive to top-tier faculty. Distinguished educators and researchers seek environments where they can teach and explore ideas freely. If this bill is enacted, we risk losing talented professors to institutions in other states, weakening Ohio's ability to provide world-class education and conduct cutting-edge research.

Conclusion

Rather than advancing higher education, SB 1 represents a step backward. Instead of politicizing our universities, Ohio should focus on policies that support student success, invest in research and innovation, and ensure that our institutions remain competitive at the state, national and global levels. We need young people to choose to come to school in Ohio, and we need experienced faculty to train the next generation of leaders. The consequences of this bill would do irreparable harm to universities across the state and negatively impact the workforce in Ohio. I urge this committee to reject SB1 and instead work collaboratively with educators, students, and institutions to strengthen—not weaken—higher education in our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Holly Clemens, Ph.D., LMT

Current and Long-time Resident of Ohio
Adjunct Faculty, Cuyahoga Community College