

Testimony of Elizabeth Rockwell, B.A.  
Before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee  
Rep. Tom Young, Chair  
March 11, 2025

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

My name is Elizabeth Rockwell, and I am a doctoral student of musicology at Ohio State University, where I have studied and taught as a graduate associate for two and a half years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1.

In August 2022, I moved to Columbus, Ohio, thrilled to begin graduate school after being the first person in my family to earn a college degree. I recognized my ability to receive higher education as the privilege that it is and I was eager to continue diving into the historiography of my discipline, knowing that some day I too would enter scholarly conversations surrounding music and its place in the world.

I feel compelled to offer my testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 1, as this legislation would fundamentally decrease the quality of education students receive in the state of Ohio and be a disservice to all those who remain in or relocate to this state to seek out higher education. In addition, I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the 14 pieces of Proponent testimony delivered to the Senate Higher Education Committee Meeting—testimonies in which I personally read in full, a task I was able to complete because of the distinctly small number of which are infinitesimal in comparison to the **1,008** pieces of Opponent testimony delivered in response.

I am deeply concerned that this legislation, if passed, would erode key American principles such as equality, freedom, and justice, by restricting efforts aimed at creating more inclusive, equitable educational environments. Senate Bill 1 poses a risk to elements of the university that are not only essential for fostering an inclusive and supportive campus culture, but they also reflect core American ideals that have shaped our nation's identity and continue to drive progress today.

The Proponent testimonies often relied on fear-mongering by way of personal anecdotes in which Ohio universities were painted as bleak institutions where right-wing students were verbally attacked and shunned at the mere hint of disagreeing with their peers. Recurring themes in the Proponent testimonies include broad claims with little backing to justify the stance, such as pointing to DEI as a method of discrimination by valuing race over merit or claiming there is a lack of intellectual diversity in the American university.

As someone who has first-hand experience in a university classroom for more than six years, I would like to share my thoughts on these statements. My experiences come from the perspective of a white woman from a county in Pennsylvania that ranked 65<sup>th</sup> out of 67 for lowest per capita income in the 2010 U.S. Census. I say this to emphasize that—on the outside—I may have appeared to any of my peers and faculty as holding any political ideology. And yet, not once did I ever feel that in the classroom, my views were criticized or devalued simply on the basis of race. When I applied to college, and later, to graduate programs, I was given the chance to display my merits through my academic performance, extracurricular activities, service to my community, and my character—not through my race or socioeconomic status.

It is frustrating to read over and over that DEI is discriminatory, making it so that a person's race or gender gives them "special treatment" over others. DEI—diversity, equity, and inclusion—encapsulates an array of social identities, including socioeconomic status, (dis)ability, age, religion, sexuality, and veteran status in addition to race and gender. Intellectual diversity (defined as the multiplicity of ideas) is DEI, too. The purpose of highlighting diversity, equity, and inclusion, is to ensure that institutions are giving a fair opportunity for people of all backgrounds to live, work, and learn.

DEI as a concept is not new. The acronym may be, but the sentiment is not. Women fighting for the right to vote (and hold office)? Civil rights leaders protesting to end segregation? Students from lower class families being

eligible for scholarships that allow them to go to college? Parental work leave for new parents who get to spend the first months of their child's life at home with them? These momentous points of progress fall under the aims of DEI. Initiatives serve to create a world where all individuals have the opportunity to contribute their voices to the intellectual dialogue. When students and faculty are able to engage with a variety of perspectives, they are better equipped to think critically and solve the complex problems facing our society. Universities are meant to be places where diverse ideas, theories, and worldviews converge to push the boundaries of knowledge.

As a student, I have never been told *what* to think, but rather *how* to think critically, using information presented to me from a range of sources. The same is true in my role as a teaching associate. I ask my students to apply a critical lens to the information they are given, and to consider a topic from multiple perspectives. Viewpoints are never thrust upon them, nor are students discouraged from sharing alternative stances to the content.

The United States was founded on the value that all people were created equal, and thus have the basic human rights of free speech, freedom of religion, due process of law, and freedom of assembly. The American Dream is built on the idea that anyone, regardless of their origins, can achieve success through hard work and dedication. However, the reality is that not everyone starts on equal footing. DEI programs serve as an essential mechanism to ensure that students—regardless of their background—have access to the same opportunities. Passing this legislation would send a message that some groups of people are less deserving of support or opportunity based on their background or identity. This undermines the very promise of the American Dream: that anyone, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status, can rise based on their abilities and efforts.

Senate Bill 1 is an attack on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, despite operating under the guise of protecting these very ideals. In disciplines like my own, this bill would have a particularly negative effect. The field of musicology is deeply rooted in the exploration of diverse cultural, historical, and theoretical contexts of music. The study of music often includes critical discussions of social movements, historical oppression, and cross-cultural interactions—subjects that are inherently political and often controversial, and yet are essential to understanding the evolution of music in society. By restricting the ways in which such topics can be explored, this bill directly stifles intellectual inquiry and limits students' ability to engage with complex, multifaceted issues.

The bill places Ohio at a disadvantage in the broader higher education landscape. Students across the nation and the world seek academic environments that promote open inquiry and intellectual freedom. Ohio's higher education system should not take steps that might make it less attractive to prospective students, particularly those interested in fields that rely on critical analysis, historical context, and cultural understanding. Limiting these areas of inquiry harms both the academic quality of Ohio's institutions and the career prospects of its graduates. Myself and others have already had to reevaluate our long-term trajectories in light of this bill. Before, I imagined a future where I could remain in Ohio after graduation and build a life in the state I have come to love, but now, I must to consider whether or not I can continue the work I have set out to do under the misguided parameters set by this bill.

Because of the obvious threats to the quality of education in the state of Ohio, I ask that you consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill. Thank you for this opportunity to exercise my civic rights to testify.

Elizabeth Rockwell