

Testimony of Shannon Winnubst, PhD
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 Higher Education Committee:

My name is Shannon Winnubst and I have been a Professor at the Ohio State University since 2008. I hold a PhD in Philosophy, with a specialization in the History of Western Philosophy, from the Pennsylvania State University (1994) and I received my BA from the University of Notre Dame in the Great Books of Western Civilization (1988). I have studied all the classics of western culture and published extensively in European philosophy, culture, and history.

I clearly believe in education and have dedicated my life and career to it. I believe it is the cornerstone of our democracy. I believe that a well-educated citizenry makes the world a better place for all people---for all people, not just the select few who are in power.

I also care about the state of Ohio. I moved here with my family in 2008 to join Ohio State and have been happy to raise my child here. I have found an unabashed love of neighbors, of communities, of schools, of sports teams, of city, of state, and of nation in all the people I meet in Ohio. I believe Ohio is a place of earnestness, full of people who want to do the right thing.

I have also always been deeply impressed by the long history of a strong devotion to higher education in the state of Ohio. Some of the finest universities in the nation are in Ohio. These universities are filled with the Ohio spirit of solving problems, caring for communities, and improving the lives of everyone in the state. With world class sports teams that match the world class research and teaching underway in these excellent universities, Ohio has long been a place with great pride in its system of higher education.

This bill, SB 1, threatens all of this. It threatens the very heart of education—namely, the courage to encounter, explore and learn about things that are *different* from us. From Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine and Martin Luther to Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and Martin Luther King, Jr., the great thinkers of the western tradition consistently warn us about the power of difference—a power that can strengthen us when embraced, but also poison us when feared. In a democracy, where every voice and life is supposed to matter, the struggle with difference is at the heart of the project. We should always remember, therefore, that the crowning achievement of the Enlightenment was the exalting of reason over violence as our strongest tool against xenophobia. This embrace of reason as our highest value, practice, and virtue is endangered by SB 1, a bill that is animated by the fear of difference—which it names “controversial topics.”

The history of higher education in Ohio is similar to the history across the United States and the world. Since their foundings in the 18th and 19th centuries, universities have been primarily a place to educate the elite. This runs against the core principles of democracy and, across the late 20th century, the gates of the university were broken down. From the GI Bill following WWII to the impact of the Civil Rights Era, we have seen the ongoing democratizing of higher education in the United States. Universities are no longer the exclusive club of the elite: everyone—literally every single background and community—is now able to become educated at this highest level.

When this happens, when a longstanding elite institution becomes democratized, the standard practices are challenged. For higher education, this has entailed a broadening of the histories and cultures that are researched and taught beyond just those of the elite. In this globalized world, this breadth of education is crucial to the ongoing fundamental connection between the university and the practice of democracy with an educated citizenry.

I offer this broad context to contest the gross misrepresentations of the current state of higher education conveyed by SB 1. I was hired at Ohio State in 2008 in the Department of Women's, Gender & Sexuality Studies, one of the top departments in the nation and the world. Many rumors swirl about what we are doing in our department. We are allegedly indoctrinating our students into topics that are called "gender ideology," and "critical race theory," and "transgenderism" (sic.). These slanderous claims, some of which I note originate in Russian media, have zero connection to the pedagogies of our department. Our classrooms are filled with spirited debate and sharp analysis of some of the most profound challenges and changes in American culture. While SB1 characterizes these as "controversial topics," we actively encourage intellectual diversity to explore all sides of these difficult challenges and histories. We believe intellectual diversity is central to a vibrant education. We also believe courage is a crucial virtue for democracy and so we do not shy away from difficult or so-called controversial topics. Most importantly, we are teaching our students the difficult histories of this nation so that we can engage a civil discourse about how to continue to cultivate this long project of democracy that is currently under threat.

This bill, which is fundamentally a bill of censorship and governmental over-reach, threatens one of the cornerstones of democracy, education. It will intensify the brain drain and demographic cliff already threatening the State of Ohio: the best students of Ohio will seek their higher education in other states, where these complex histories and important topics are continuing to be taught and researched. I know this, because I have a Junior in High School right now who is seeking colleges "anywhere but Ohio." This is avoidable! If you care about the State of Ohio, I plead with you not to turn against its long history of excellent higher education. I urge all of you to do the right thing and refuse to allow one of our greatest points of pride become the object of divisive politics: vote "no" to SB 1.