

February 11, 2025

## American Historical Association Testimony in Opposition to SB 1

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

The American Historical Association registers strong concern about Ohio Senate Bill 1. During last year's legislative cycle, the AHA submitted testimony questioning the wisdom of new mechanisms that previous versions of this legislation—then, SB 83—would create to overrule the professional judgment and academic expertise of faculty. The same unwise provisions are included in SB 1, and many of our previous objections still apply.

The AHA applauds many of the bill's stated goals: free inquiry, true intellectual diversity, and vigorous debate. Classrooms are and must remain spaces where students can experiment with ideas—new and old—while learning to value curiosity, analytical thinking, and academic integrity.

We have grave doubts, however, about the utility of SB 1's heavy-handed interventions in both history education and university administration.

Our concerns focus on several troubling elements of SB 1, including the following clauses:

- Defining “intellectual diversity” in a manner that **undercuts the free exchange of ideas**. The bill's definition establishes a standard for evaluating both students and faculty on the degree to which they display “multiple, divergent, and varied perspectives on an extensive range of public policy issues,” especially those that are the “subject of political controversy.” **History students and faculty should be evaluated on the quality of their work and not where they stand on matters of public policy.**
- Instituting a vaguely defined and seemingly limitless process for “retrenchment” as a rationale for **firing faculty regardless of tenure or merit**. The breadth of the provision in this bill has the potential to fundamentally undermine protections for intellectual freedom necessary to assure integrity and innovation in both teaching and research.
- Authorizing boards of regents and elected officials to **overrule the professional judgment of qualified scholars**, to reject the “consensus or foundational beliefs of an academic discipline,” and to censure or terminate faculty (regardless of tenure) if they deem them to have violated vague standards of “intellectual diversity.” Ohio's public colleges and universities should not be forced to promote discredited theories or ignore evidence to create space for certain ideas just because doing so is politically expedient.

- Creating new procedures to **investigate and punish both faculty *and* students for what they say and do** in the classroom. Threats, investigations, and intimidation will not make any student feel more comfortable sharing potentially controversial ideas and interpretations.
- Establishing **overly prescriptive requirements**—assigning 11 texts and even dictating the structure of the final exam—for a new “American civic literacy” course, mandatory for graduation from any public college or university.
- **Undermining the quality of history instruction in Ohio.** The required “civic literacy” course **strips essential documents of the historical context** necessary for students to understand fully the significance, meaning, and function of these foundational texts. SB 1 is unusually detailed in its stipulations about the structure and content of this course. This makes the **absence of history**—included in the many versions of SB 83—especially glaring.

Faculty at Ohio’s world-class public colleges and universities already teach foundational texts in an array of courses. But many universities across the nation opt to divide US history into a two-course sequence, enabling faculty to devote more time and attention to the significance of transformational texts, as well as the richly layered context in which they were produced. SB 1 takes fundamental decisions about the content and structure of a core general education course out of the hands of qualified faculty and departments, forcing educators to prioritize the wishes of the state legislature over the needs and interests of students. There are far more productive ways for policymakers and university administrators to encourage student learning in history and civics.

The astonishingly broad retrenchment clause in SB 1 threatens to diminish Ohio’s public institutions of higher learning. Without tenure protections, scholars will tilt toward “safe” areas of exploration less likely to generate the breakthroughs and innovations that bring recognition to university and economic development to the state. Their teaching will be similarly cautious. Without meaningful tenure protections, an educator avoids controversy, including the kinds of issues that students need and want to engage in order to become future leaders.

With more than 10,500 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the imperative of historical thinking in public life.

Everything has a history. If passed, SB 1 would undermine public higher education in Ohio.

Sincerely,



James Grossman  
Executive Director