

Testimony of Ali Watts, 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 House Workforce and Higher Education Committee:

My name is Dr. Ali Watts, and I am an assistant professor in the School of Counseling, Higher Education, Leadership & Foundations at Bowling Green State University, where I teach courses related to the history, influence, and administrative organization of U.S. colleges and universities. Graduate students in our programs aspire to positions as higher education administrators and student affairs professionals—most of whom hope to remain employees of public universities within the state of Ohio. I do not represent Bowling Green State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen.

I am writing today to express my strong opposition to Senate Bill 1/House Bill 6: Enact Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, which I believe will have devastating consequences for public higher education in Ohio. As someone deeply invested in student success and the well-being of our institutions, I urge you to reconsider this legislation.

First, Senate Bill 1 will harm student retention and success rates. As decades of scholarly research have demonstrated, thriving academic environments require institutions to provide robust support systems for students from diverse backgrounds, and these supports are most effective when they are grounded in culturally-sustaining, historically conscious frameworks. The proposed bill's restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives will hinder institutions from creating inclusive and supportive learning environments—particularly for our most vulnerable and marginalized populations. Research consistently shows that students who feel a sense of belonging are more likely to persist in their studies, graduate, and report satisfaction and identification with their alma mater (with resulting increases in alumni donations). By dismantling these programs, the state risks alienating underrepresented students, increasing dropout rates, and weakening Ohio's workforce pipeline. At the same time, students looking for campus environments more conducive to their academic and economic success will increasingly choose to move out of state, taking both their tuition dollars and their future employment earnings out of Ohio. The long-term effect will be a decline in the number of college graduates ready to contribute to our state's economy. Many of our public institutions are already struggling with declining enrollments due to demographic shifts and the decrease in birth cohort sizes and can ill afford to make themselves un hospitable to prospective students. It is obvious both from both increased student and alumni activism on college campuses that have rushed to preemptively comply with this as well as the remarkable groundswell of opposition testimony during the Senate Higher Education Committees hearing that this is a deeply unpopular shift in policy, and one that will have significant ramifications.

On this front, it is also important to note that minoritized students, faculty, and staff will not be the only ones harmed by the removal of DEI programming, support services, and staff positions. Again, research has demonstrated, time and time again, that all students benefit from exposure to diverse learning environments and open reflection on cultural difference and patterns of access and equity.

Banning students' access to cultural programming and rendering them ignorant of histories, lived experiences, and value systems different from their own will both enfeeble our children's ability to navigate an increasingly global and cosmopolitan world, and disadvantage them in a marketplace that commonly lists the ability to work with diverse teams and navigate complex socio-political contexts as necessary skills for employment.

Second, this bill endangers academic freedom and shared governance, which are essential to maintaining the integrity of higher education and recruiting competitive researchers and instructors to the state. Faculty expertise should guide the development of curriculum and evaluation of teaching methods, ensuring that students receive an education based on rigorous scholarship rather than political mandates. SB 1's provisions granting state officials greater control over academic policies undermine shared governance, eroding faculty authority and discouraging top scholars from teaching and researching in Ohio. We must learn from the consequences faced in states like Florida, Texas, and Indiana that have already passed strikingly similar bills—including the rapid departure of experienced scholars, teachers, and critical support staff and the difficulty attracting new talent willing to work within more precarious and unstable academies. Academic institutions thrive when they can attract scholars who are empowered to engage in open and critical inquiry rather than feeling surveilled and undermined by their administration and the state apparatus. Curtailing academic freedoms and faculty labor rights will diminish the quality and reputation of Ohio's higher education institutions and place the legislature at odds with the broader organized labor community within the state.

It is also important to note that there are also significant logical inconsistencies within the current draft of Senate Bill 1—attempting to simultaneously place restrictions or 'gag orders' on what the bill refers to as "controversial subject" (excessively vague and broad language—likely to result in chilled speech and heightened anxieties about compliance) while also claiming to promote intellectual diversity and free exchange of ideas. Both visions cannot hold.

Finally, Senate Bill 1 imposes costly, unfunded mandates that will burden Ohio taxpayers and institutions through excessive reporting mechanisms, investigation requirements, and curriculum/programming audits. The administrative requirements and reporting mandates associated with this legislation will require additional bureaucratic oversight, diverting resources away from student support services and classroom instruction. Without dedicated state funding to cover these costs, institutions will be forced to either reallocate limited resources or raise tuition and fees, making higher education less accessible to Ohio residents. This fiscal strain will ultimately reduce enrollment and graduation rates, further harming the state's economic competitiveness. It is also likely that the vagueness and overbreadth of policy language within the current SB 1 draft will invite legal challenges from the American Civil Liberties Union, FIRE, and other advocacy groups that are actively involved in lawsuits objecting to the constitutionality of similar bills in other states (and federally). These legal battles are costly—and we should learn from the experiences of our peers across the country and focus our attention on protecting the sustainability and wellbeing of our prized institutions of higher education rather than subjecting them to extended challenge. Our institutions of public higher education are already facing significant economic and policy disruption—we do not need to add to this uncertainty by adding additional burdens and barriers.

In light of these concerns, I urge you to oppose Senate Bill 1/House Bill 6 and work toward policies that genuinely support student success, uphold academic freedom, and ensure financial sustainability in higher education. As you know, SB 1 is already an extraordinarily unpopular bill—particularly with the college students that it claims to defend. If the legislature were truly interested in advancing Ohio public higher education, it would focus on the real issue facing our institutions—rising tuition costs, state divestment, and the looming demographic cliff. Ohio’s future depends on a strong and independent higher education system that prioritizes excellence, equity, and opportunity for all students.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I appreciate your leadership and hope you will stand against this harmful legislation.

Thank you,

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