

Testimony of Nicole Antoinette Smith, Doctoral Student
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 Nicole Antoinette Smith. I have taught Analytics and information Systems at Ohio University on the Athens, OH, campus for eight years. I do not represent Ohio University; I am submitting testimony as a private citizen who opposes Senate Bill 1.

As a first-generation college graduate, I know firsthand how access to higher education transforms lives. My parents did not graduate from high school, and my only opportunity to attend college was through Ohio University. I earned a bachelor's degree in management information systems and marketing and a master's in computer information systems. I am currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Creative Leadership for Innovation and Change. I am also a social entrepreneur, the founder of eleV8t, a workforce development and training program, the Sports Legends of Cleveland, and a faculty advisor for the Multicultural Student Business Caucus. My life's work is dedicated to ensuring that opportunity is not a privilege but a right for all students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds.

The Importance of DEI in Higher Education

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are not about exclusion or favoritism but about leveling the playing field for historically underrepresented and marginalized communities. Research overwhelmingly supports the positive impact of DEI efforts in education, economic mobility, and workforce innovation:

- **Better Academic & Career Outcomes:** A diverse student body enhances critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork skills, essential for global competitiveness (Gurin et al., 2002).
- **Workforce & Economic Impact:** Inclusive environments boost productivity and innovation, with companies in the top quartile for racial diversity being 35% more likely to outperform their peers (McKinsey & Company, 2015).
- **Retention & Graduation Rates:** DEI initiatives help first-generation, low-income, and minority students persist and graduate at higher rates (Museus, 2014).
- **Historical & Systemic Inequities:** Access to higher education has never been equal. Policies like Affirmative Action and DEI initiatives address structural inequalities rooted in history.

Historical Context of Racial Inequality in Higher Education

Education has long been weaponized against Black and marginalized communities. From slavery to Jim Crow, to redlining and underfunding public schools, access to education has been systematically denied. The events of American history—from the arrival of enslaved Africans in 1619 to the passing of Jim Crow laws in 1877 to the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which legalized segregation—show that inequities are not accidental but designed.

It was not until Brown v. Board of Education (1954) that schools were desegregated, and even then, many institutions resisted. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Affirmative Action policies helped to correct past injustices, but these protections are now under attack.

The Harm Senate Bill 1 Would Cause

Senate Bill 1 threatens to dismantle the programs that ensure equal access and representation in higher education. The elimination of DEI offices, funding, and programs would result in:

- **Increased Disparities:** Without target recruitment and support, first-generation, low-income, and students of color will face even more significant barriers to success.
- **Faculty and Staff Exodus:** Many scholars dedicated to equity and inclusion will leave Ohio's universities for states that value their contributions.
- **Damage to Ohio's Reputation:** Ohio's universities will struggle to attract top talent and diverse students, harming the state's workforce pipeline and economy.
- **Hostile Campus Environments:** Without DEI initiatives, discrimination and exclusion will go unchecked, making campuses less inclusive and safe for students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and other marginalized groups.

Conclusion: The Need to Protect DEI and Oppose SB 1

Senate Bill 1 is a direct attack on equal opportunity in higher education. It ignores the long history of racial and social inequities in the U.S. and threatens to reverse decades of progress in student success, faculty diversity, and workplace readiness. I urge the committee members to reject this bill and stand on the right side of history—where education is a pathway to success for all, not just for those who have always had access.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Nicole Antoinette Smith
Associate Professor of Instruction, Doctoral Student, Author, Speaker, FourSight® Certified Facilitator, Creative Problem-Solving Consultant, Management Consulting Coach, Social Entrepreneur