

Presented to the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Proposal to SB 1

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March 11, 2025

Honorable Members of the House Committee

Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Chair Tom Young, Vice Chair Kevin Ritter, Ranking Member Beryl Piccolantonio and members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide written and verbal testimony. My name is Dr. Hope Bland and I am an adjunct Professor. I teach in the Department of Social Work at the University of Toledo. I come before you today as a concerned citizen and advocate for academic freedom, equal opportunity, and critical thinking in higher education. I strongly urge this legislative body to reject any proposals aimed at banning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and culturally responsive courses in Ohio's colleges and universities.

At its core, higher education exists to prepare students for the realities of an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. The effort to eliminate DEI programs and restrict culturally responsive courses does not advance that goal; rather, it actively undermines Ohio's ability to produce well-rounded graduates who can navigate a multicultural workforce, participate in civic engagement, and contribute meaningfully to society.

### **Public Opposition: This Process Must Not Be a Mere Formality**

The people of Ohio have made their voices heard, and this legislative process should reflect genuine democratic engagement—not serve as a mere formality to push through a pre-determined political agenda. Across Ohio, **students, faculty, business leaders, community advocates, and everyday citizens** have spoken out against this proposed ban.

Young minds—our future leaders—have testified, protested, written letters, and engaged in this process because they believe in an Ohio that values inclusivity, fairness, and intellectual freedom. They are looking for hope in their advocacy, not despair in witnessing their voices ignored by a small group of politicians.

Passing such a sweeping and harmful measure despite this public outcry would send a clear message: that the democratic process in Ohio is not truly for the people but rather for the political ambitions of a select few. That is not how democracy should work or how Ohio should govern its institutions of higher learning.

### **Governor DeWine's Own Words and Actions on Systemic Racism**

In 2020, Governor Mike DeWine acknowledged a hard truth: “Racism is a public health crisis.” He stated that there are “many causes for the lack of equity, including systemic racism,” and he made it clear that “we have an obligation to look at these racial disparities and say ‘that’s not right.’ We have to do everything in our power to deal with this.”

Recognizing the depth of the issue, Governor DeWine called for change across multiple sectors, including higher education, foster care, and environmental protection. He created the Governor’s Equity Advisory Board to ensure a permanent commitment to addressing racial disparities in the State of Ohio.

In 2021, Governor DeWine commissioned a study on systemic racism in Ohio’s child welfare system. The findings were astounding: systemic racism is deeply embedded in all systems that impact people of color in Ohio. This was not an opinion—it was a data-driven conclusion.

With these findings in hand, how can we, in 2025, justify introducing bills that seek to ban DEI in higher education—the very institution that prepares young people for critical thinking, diverse workplaces, and inclusive leadership? If our own state leadership has acknowledged the existence and pervasiveness of systemic racism, then eliminating efforts to address it is not just contradictory—it is irresponsible.

### **Ignoring the Past Means History Will Inevitably Repeat Itself**

If we fail to address the injustices of the past, we risk repeating them. This bill resembles a dangerous regression to a Jim Crow-era mentality, where legal and institutional efforts were designed to erase, suppress, and control access to education and economic mobility for marginalized communities.

During the Jim Crow era, policies were strategically implemented to limit educational opportunities for Black Americans, deny them access to resources, and keep them economically and politically powerless. The systematic effort to erase conversations on race, history, and equity in higher education today mirrors those same oppressive tactics.

We must recognize that progress is not guaranteed—it requires vigilance. The very fact that this legislation is being proposed is evidence that the lessons of history are being forgotten. If we strip away DEI programs, silence culturally responsive education, and suppress conversations on systemic racism, we are setting the stage for history to repeat itself.

### **The Value of DEI in Higher Education**

DEI programs are not about division; they are about access, opportunity, and fostering an inclusive learning environment where all students can succeed, regardless of their background. Research consistently shows that institutions with strong DEI programs see higher student engagement, better retention rates, and improved academic success across demographics.

These initiatives ensure that students from all backgrounds have access to support networks, mentorship, and resources necessary to thrive.

Eliminating DEI programs sends a dangerous message: that Ohio does not value equal access to education, that it does not prioritize a campus culture of belonging, and that it is willing to sacrifice economic and academic competitiveness for political gain.

### **Possible Solutions: Strengthening DEI and Expanding Access**

Rather than banning DEI programs and culturally responsive education, Ohio should focus on solutions that foster unity, economic growth, and educational excellence. Consider the following alternatives:

1. **Enhance Critical Thinking in Education** – Require coursework that strengthens analytical skills, diverse problem-solving, and cross-cultural competencies rather than eliminating them. Critical thinking is essential for innovation, leadership, and civic engagement.
2. **Expand Workforce Development Programs** – Many Ohio businesses value diversity and inclusion in hiring. Strengthening partnerships between higher education institutions and industries that prioritize these values will make Ohio's economy more competitive.
3. **Increase Educational Access for All Students** – Instead of dismantling DEI, Ohio should expand access to resources, scholarships, and mentorship programs for students from all backgrounds, ensuring equal opportunities for success.
4. **Commit to Honest, Data-Driven Policy** – If systemic racism exists in Ohio's key institutions—as our own Governor's commissioned study found—then addressing these disparities should be a priority, not something to be erased from discussion. Policymakers should make decisions based on factual data, not political pressure.
5. **Preserve Academic Freedom** – Universities must remain institutions of free inquiry, open debate, and intellectual exploration. Legislating what can and cannot be taught undermines the very purpose of higher education.

### **Conclusion**

At a time when our own state leadership has acknowledged systemic racism and committed to addressing it, banning DEI programs and culturally responsive education is not only a step backward—it is a failure of conscience.

The people of Ohio have spoken, and their voices must matter. Higher education is meant to expand minds, challenge perspectives, and prepare students for a diverse and evolving world. To deny students access to critical discussions and learning opportunities is to deny them the very foundation of a quality education.

I urge you to reject this misguided effort to dismantle DEI programs and censor culturally responsive courses. Let Ohio be a leader in academic excellence and opportunity, not a cautionary tale of regressive policymaking.

I want to share with you my 24-year-old daughter's words as a result of this Bill and the attack on Diversity, Equity, and inclusion across this country. She feels that it is a direct attack on her as an African American young person; *"I need to leave this country. I don't want to live here anymore, and I've been doing research. I want to detach from this oppression and this kind of living. It's not healthy, it's not safe and it's a waste of my time on earth."* As a parent, this hit hard. It now becomes personal.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully submitted,

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