

Testimony Opposing SB 1

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Rep. Tom Young, Chair

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

My name is Ashley Nickels, and I am a faculty member in the School of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State University. But today, I am here as a private citizen, speaking on my own behalf. I have dedicated my career to studying civic power and democracy, to understanding how people engage in public life, and to teaching students how to navigate conflict in constructive ways.

In my classroom, students come from different political backgrounds, lived experiences, and perspectives. Some are deeply engaged in social justice movements; others are more skeptical of political action altogether. What unites them is the space to ask difficult questions and engage in hard conversations about power, governance, and justice. But not everything is up for debate—some topics, like whether or not racism exists, are not meaningful starting points for dialogue. Structural racism is not a belief system; it is an empirical reality, documented in decades of research, legal precedent, and lived experience. The very existence of SB 1—legislation that seeks to restrict the discussion of race and inequality under the guise of protecting “intellectual diversity”—is itself an example of how racism is embedded in policy and practice.

SB 1 undermines the very foundation of higher education by introducing deliberately vague and politically motivated restrictions that will create a chilling effect in university classrooms. Section 3345.0217(A)(1) states that faculty “shall allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies” and “shall not seek to indoctrinate any social, political, or religious point of view.” But the bill fails to define what constitutes “indoctrination” or even what makes a topic controversial. Section 3345.0217(B)(7) further prohibits faculty from “encouraging or discouraging” students from endorsing or rejecting a political or social stance, but it does not clarify whether presenting overwhelming empirical evidence—for example, that redlining and racial segregation shaped contemporary economic disparities—could be construed as “discouraging” certain viewpoints.

By leaving these terms undefined, SB 1 does not need to explicitly ban discussions of race, gender, or power—it simply makes these discussions too risky to have. Faculty will be forced to self-censor rather than risk a complaint from a student who perceives their teaching as ideological. The bill enables any student, faculty member, or member of the public to file complaints against instructors, compelling institutions to investigate and respond to alleged violations or risk losing state funding (Section 3345.0217(C)). In this environment, faculty may avoid teaching about systemic racism, gender discrimination, or immigration policies—not because these topics are inappropriate for academic discussion, but because the law’s vagueness makes it impossible to predict how their words will be interpreted and punished.

Rather than fostering “intellectual diversity,” this legislation promotes intellectual avoidance—turning education into an act of risk management rather than inquiry. It sends a clear message that certain ideas, certain people, and certain histories should not be discussed.

But a democracy cannot function without people who know how to wrestle with hard questions, engage across differences, and challenge ideas—including their own. SB 1 is a direct threat to this mission.

I urge you to vote no on SB1/HB 6.