

## **Testimony of Pranav Jani, Ph.D.**

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 Dr. Pranav Jani, and I am a professor of English and director of Asian American Studies at Ohio State, where I have taught for 21 years. I am also president of the Ohio State chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which has proudly defended academic freedom for over a century. I do not represent Ohio State, but I rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

Like hundreds of people across Ohio, I find SB1 to be contradictory, unnecessary, and enormously expensive to implement with no demonstrable gain to the quality of higher education. For almost two years, since the old bill SB 83 was introduced, I have been writing Op-Eds, giving interviews, and holding forums against a bill that I see as destroying the foundation of higher education in Ohio – by restricting teaching and learning, instituting government surveillance onto the many evaluations faculty already undergo, banning necessary DEI programs, and, last but not least, undercutting unions.

But today, I want to have more of a conversation. I want to convince you of my position against SB 1 by appealing to what I hope is our common ground. The idea that students need freedom of thought in the classroom regardless of identity or politics. The idea that this freedom of expression is essential to teaching and learning.

The courses that my colleagues and I teach in fields like Ethnic Studies, Black Studies, Women's and Gender Studies, Disability Studies, and Postcolonial Studies, first of all, are not about indoctrination but have tremendously contributed to academic knowledge since they came into being – after the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

To speak specifically about departments of English and my fields of Ethnic Studies and Postcolonial Studies: before the development of these fields, most English classes -- even at the college level – focused only white authors, often male. And they hardly taught literature outside of England and the US.

In other words, students were kept from knowing how deep, diverse, and global literary studies in English is. **They were *prevented* from exploring the diversity of ideas in English literature.**

Arguably, even with all these developments, we need *more* of this diversity in teaching English literature, not less. Just reflect for a moment. Can you quickly identify your favorite Asian American author? Have you ever read a short story in English from Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya or anywhere else in the continent of Africa? Going deeper: have you ever considered how immigrant women writers connect issues of national and racial identity with issues of marriage, family, and domestic work?

I love reading Shakespeare and Steinbeck, Joyce and Hemingway. But there's much more to the world than what these brilliant writers offer. As Shakespeare might put it: "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of" in the classrooms we had in the past.

If SB 1 passes, however, my courses might be unjustly targeted for *restricting* intellectual diversity and violating the policy on "controversial concepts."

Some of the core topics we study – structural racism, colonialism, slavery, nations and borders, patriarchy and sexuality, militarism and empire – are ones that the bill targets for scrutiny. Going further, the scholarly fields I work and teach in take research-based positions on these topics that those supporting SB1 may not like: we consider colonialism and slavery to be unjust and exploitative, we center the voices of the enslaved and colonized in approaching questions of history and culture, and we demonstrate how slavery and colonialism were tied up with the emergence of capitalism.

In short, the very fields that have greatly expanded diversity of thought in English departments and other parts of academia could be targeted because of political bias and an *unwillingness* to consider alternative perspectives. Which would go against our common view that there ought to be freedom in the classroom, and the field – not politics – should shape what students learn.

Let me illustrate how I teach – and how I am expanding, not constricting, my students' knowledge. To be honest, I would love to have a chance to show you rather than tell you. Whether you are for this bill, against it, or on the fence, **I invite you to come to my undergraduate class this semester in Asian American Studies and see for yourself.** I think you would have an enriching experience – even if we don't see eye to eye.

As I tell my students on Day One: expect to be thrown in at the deep end, taking up topics and hearing positions that you may not have heard of, or may disagree with. But know that **your grade is based not on whether you agree with me or even the premises of the field**, but whether you are willing to read critically, research widely, and formulate arguments backed by evidence.

Students might indeed get uncomfortable in my classes. And that's good! That's how we learn – as even Socrates agrees.

But this issue of discomfort doesn't only apply to conservative students, or white students, or male students or what have you. The texts I choose, deliberately, illuminate positions and histories that are so complex that each student in my classes, regardless of their politics and identity, will have a moment where they feel discomfort, raise debates, and engage in self-reflection.

As an example, let me share my approach to teaching Dr. Martin Luther King's 1963 essay, "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" – a text I know we all respect since it's listed in SB 1 as mandatory reading for a proposed "Civics Literacy" class.

My first challenge in teaching Dr. King is that students – of all political backgrounds – offer him so much respect (as he deserves) that they simply assume they agree with him. I need to break through this idea to get them to actually *read* what he had to say.

The core of Dr King's argument in the letter is that it is our solemn duty to break laws that are unjust. Arguing against automatic obedience with laws, he asks us to consider whether they are legitimate and lead towards justice, or actually do the opposite. This is why he and his fellow protestors were arrested in Birmingham, for defying laws of racial segregation.

So when I enter class, I begin this way: "Should we rethink our positive views about Dr. King? He says we should break laws, just because we feel they are unjust. Wouldn't that lead to anarchy?" This immediately gets their attention – they love to be challenged! Slowing down the discussion, I ask them whether they disagree or agree with me, to back up their claims with evidence.

Those who want to defend Dr. King against what I said—often but not always more left of center—bring out quotes to show his firm guidelines on how we decide which laws are unjust. Those who start agreeing with me—often but not always more to the right—cite quotes to say Dr. King's essay is indeed problematic, and laid the groundwork for movements they don't like.

In this way we draw out, with great detail and complexity, the arguments Dr. King makes in the essay. Whatever their political position, I want my students to recognize that Dr. King was an incredibly nuanced writer and thinker. As we go deeper, for instance, I have students wrestle with the fact that Dr. King's radical criticisms of American racism in the letter are, in fact, grounded in his deep faith in Christianity and Western philosophical traditions.

Consider my method of teaching here. In the humanities and many other areas, we value student-centered and democratic learning – the opposite of indoctrination. Seeing ourselves as guides and navigators to student knowledge, we create many opportunities for students to speak and lead.

My students and I are co-creators of the knowledge we gain in the classroom, with my expertise helping them to widen their intellectual horizons and develop critical reading and writing skills.

Our Ohio college students—who are none other than our children and grandchildren, our friends and neighbors—are smart, curious, self-motivated, and *diverse*. Each one of them has something to learn, and something important to contribute.

Every student who walks into the door of my classroom is *my* student, my responsibility. Whatever their race, gender, ability, sexual orientation, class position, nationality, religion, or political perspective, I care a great deal for them and their development.

My job is to teach them a skill set – to research and think and write widely. Not to force-feed them my ideas. To do otherwise would be to go against my own democratic values.

Please stop SB 1. The bill would stifle the organic, democratic, and open exchange of ideas that helps me teach my students. Let educators on the ground determine how and what Ohio students learn.

Sincerely

Dr. Pranav Jani