

Testimony of Jasmine Abukar, 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. Jasmine Abukar, and I am a professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at The Ohio State University. I do not represent the university, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

As an educator whose expertise is in postsecondary education, I have a unique perspective on Senate Bill 1, including its potential to have devastating consequences on our state's educational system, and subsequently, our state economy.

General Opposition to Rhetoric

Prior to detailing my main points, I would like to briefly note that **SB1 contains contradictory language about “free inquiry” while simultaneously banning various topics of inquiry** and threatening to withhold funding from institutions who do not comply. Moreover, the bill champions so-called “intellectual diversity” while decrying “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI). **By definition, intellectual diversity is included in DEI.**

This nonsensical rhetoric is a thinly veiled attempt to diminish progressive ideas while promoting conservative ones, which is against the espoused spirit of the bill. I am a proponent of free speech and learning from varied perspectives, but this bill weaponizes those ideas to functionally censor faculty, staff, and students.

SB1 Worsens Already-Challenging Enrollment Landscape

For years, higher education researchers and administrators have been bracing themselves for the projected *enrollment cliff* (sometimes described as the demographic cliff). As you likely know, the number of high school graduates is anticipated to drop in the coming years. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education recently estimated that 2025 will be the peak of high school graduation rates, followed by a 15-year decline. This is in an already-challenging landscape wherein affordability and perceived value are deterrents for students to seek a college education.

Enter SB1, which effectively limits institutional capacity to enroll and admit students. The varied initiatives that the bill's sponsors opaquely lump under 'DEI' are often tools to recruit the best students possible from varied backgrounds around the world. DEI initiatives

do not give these students an improper advantage, but rather help alleviate existing and well-studied obstacles that a variety of students face. **Losses in enrollment will undoubtedly impact the financial viability of our state's colleges and institutions, which will in turn affect current students, employees, and surrounding communities.**

SB1 Negatively Impacts Retention and Graduation Rates

Decades of research point to *sense of belonging* and *campus climate* as prominent variables in student retention and persistence to graduation. Many of the concepts, programs, and initiatives that SB1 seeks to eliminate impacts a sense of belonging for the majority of students. Programs that allow for students to meet and commune with people who have shared identities are not exclusionary, in fact, we cannot legally bar any students from such programming. Rather, **research demonstrates such programs reinforce a sense of belonging, which in turn, increases persistence.**

One of the most prominent models to assess campus climates indicates the following variables influence positive or negative perceptions of campus experience, which subsequently impact retention and graduation: sociopolitical forces (e.g., state laws), representation of varied identities across faculty/staff, interactions with people across varied identities, interactions with people of shared identities, representation in the curriculum, equitable resource allocation, policies and practice that support students. **SB1 negatively impacts nearly all the measures which support a positive campus climate, including diversity of faculty/staff, curricular representation, and equitable resource allocation for student initiatives.**

SB1 Will Exacerbate Ohio's Brain Drain

Economists have largely agreed that Ohio is suffering from a so-called *brain drain* for over a decade. Ohioans with postsecondary are rapidly leaving the state for other regions. Due to immigrant labor and recruitment of credentialed workers from other areas, we have mostly been able to mitigate the effects of this. But with a federal administration that is hostile to immigrants, and a state legislature that, as evidenced by this bill, is hostile to higher education, that will no longer be sufficient.

SB1 will limit higher education institutions' ability to recruit talented faculty and staff to lead the cutting edge research, initiatives, and facilities that many parts of our state's economy relies on. I have witnessed this firsthand: Exceptional candidate cites concerns over "Ohio politics" as their reason for declining a role at an institution. Multiple colleagues have the same story. Our colleges and universities cannot survive on institutional branding and appeals to low cost of living. Our laws matter more.

DEI Policies Drive Success of Colleges

We also must not ignore our history. Within the scholarship of higher education, the period of 1945-1970 is known both as the *golden age* of colleges and universities as well as a time of intensive change. **Federal funding and laws like the GI Bill and Title IV (which are**

definitionally DEI laws), expanded access to higher education. These enrollment booms forced institutions to expand facilities, services, and educational offerings, which ultimately made them the economic and workforce drivers we have known them to be for decades. **Research continues to show that diversity and access increase innovation on campuses. SB1 would surely curtail our state's progress and advancement.**

SB1 Overrides Shared Governance

Shared governance is a cornerstone of higher education. University boards, administrators, faculty, staff, and students all have an important role in the direction of their institutions. By barring the free actions of the higher education workforce, such as the ability to strike, teach the truth, or forcing choice between governmental funding and educational integrity, **SB1 overrides shared governance with legislative overreach.**

Lastly, I would like to note that we have been here before with similar bills. And we, the people, overwhelmingly said no.

In conclusion, I vehemently oppose SB1, and implore this committee to not only actively listen to their constituents, but ensure that we are not back here having these same conversations in a few months.