

Testimony of Tabo Mkandawire
Before the House Higher Education Committee
Representative Tom Young, Chair
March 11, 2025

Thank you Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee for allowing me to testify. My name is Tabo Mkandawire and I urge you to vote NO on Senate Bill 1.

I am a biomedical engineering student and recipient of the highest merit scholarship at Ohio State University, the Stamps Eminence Scholarship. I am an out-of-state student from Pittsburgh, PA and moved away from my family and close friends to be at this school. I turned down other full-ride offers from several universities and an acceptance into the highest ranked program for my major in the nation. And for the last two years, I have not second-guessed or regretted my decision for a second. The immersion into my field, holistic approach to education, and the connections and mentorship I've found with amazing faculty have made my time at OSU more than worth it. For the last two years, I have not second-guessed my decision until now. The reasons I chose Ohio State University—the phenomenal faculty and intellectual opportunities available—are directly under attack by SB1.

The passing of SB1 will devalue my degree. While I will still receive a diploma in two years, the integrity of the classrooms in which I learn—the places where I gather the knowledge that makes me worthy of walking across a graduation stage—will have been eroded. While claiming to promote “intellectual diversity”, SB1 silences the voices of instructors and students wanting to engage with diversity as it exists in the real world. With no clear definition as to what the government will deem “DEI practices”, officials are given the power to point at any course content and strip it from the curriculum. At the end of four years I will have half the amount of experience engaging in meaningful discourse with classmates as I signed up to when I came to OSU. Specific to me, an engineer from any other state will almost certainly be a better candidate than I am for a job or graduate school position because companies and schools can guarantee that they at least had the opportunity to properly address real challenges facing different people in the world. Companies will not care to hire an engineer who cannot address and articulate diverse user end needs. The capacity to problem-solve and critically think in different scenarios is the basis of engineering, and SB1 makes little room for those. Many students, including myself, are not happy with this, but many students do not have the means to up and leave for a different school. The passing of SB1 will seal their fate to holding a devalued degree—an insult to the years of work it takes to get one.

In moments of uncertainty such as this, I am accustomed to turning to faculty for their leadership; however, I find that they are just as uncertain as I am. I feel that to put their workers’

rights under attack is a direct hit to the integrity of all higher education. I cannot expect to receive the highest quality education possible, when those responsible to deliver it to me are worried about their job security, losing tenure, being doxxed via public syllabi scrutiny, or having to uproot and redesign curricula based on arbitrary claims of “promoting DEI”. They will be forced to choose between prioritizing compliance with this bill or delivering quality education—a direct threat to their entire careers and their integrities. Unlike many students, faculty do have the capacity to leave and find other jobs in states that value their expertise and professionalism. Those who do will take their intellect, reputations, and millions of dollars of federal grant funding with them.

While I will not be leaving if this bill passes, I speak for my past self when I say that I would not have moved to Ohio had I known my education and my future would be under direct attack. I speak for current students, who—if this bill passes—will look at the state of education in Ohio and undoubtedly choose elsewhere. When I begin applying to graduate school programs, I will undoubtedly be looking elsewhere.

You are driving away your students and faculty. You are driving away your talent. You are driving away the funds that come with those. SB1 will only serve to make this state worse.

I love this place—not because I have to but because I choose to. When I moved here, I made a commitment to my education, my future, and the educations and futures of my fellow students across the state. I ask you to take my testimony to heart and vote NO on this bill before it harms the education of Ohioans. Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony.