

Elshaddai Melaku
University of Cincinnati | Class of 2026
emelaku8671@gmail.com
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Dear Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the Ohio House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for allowing me to submit testimony against SB 1.

I am in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1 because Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives have played a pivotal role in my academic and professional journey. As an underrepresented student, these programs have not only uplifted me but have also held me accountable, pushing me toward success in ways I may not have otherwise achieved.

At the University of Cincinnati, I am a student in the University Honors Program (UHP), which has been a significant aspect of my collegiate journey, pushing me to challenge myself, seek new opportunities, and grow both academically and personally. One of the core lessons of this program is how we can become “global citizen scholars.” To me, a global citizen scholar is someone who learns from others, advocates for meaningful change, and amplifies the voices of those often unheard. This definition has evolved as I’ve stepped into leadership roles and actively engaged in efforts to support my peers, many of which have been made possible by the very diversity, equity, and inclusion programs this bill seeks to eliminate.

DEI initiatives are necessary structures that increase student retention, foster a sense of belonging, and create opportunities for all students to believe in their potential. Senate Bill 1 threatens to dismantle these programs, sending a message that students like me do not matter. That my success is not a priority. I refuse to accept that.

The African American Cultural & Resource Center (AACRC) at UC, a space made possible by the efforts this bill seeks to erase, has been my foundation. It has provided me with mentorship, community, and opportunities that have shaped my future, and that I have been able to give back to serving as a mentor for my peers. Without this mentorship, a first generation student like me wouldn’t have believed that I could be successful in college. It is because of my mentors that I have dared to believe I could pursue engineering, and I have made it into the fourth year of my program because of it.

During the AACRC Spring Break Tour, I met with alumni who once stood in my position. They spoke of the battles they fought to create and preserve spaces like the AACRC, and I saw firsthand what is at stake when these resources are taken away. That lesson is why I am here today—opposing SB 1, because I know what it would mean to lose these critical spaces.

SB 1 would undo decades of progress, erasing the voices of marginalized students, and undermining the programs that have made higher education more accessible. It is through these programs that universities see higher retention rates, and that allow for the intellectual landscape of the University to be more vast. If this bill passes, it will have real consequences. It will push students out. It will silence voices. It will strip away the resources that make institutions like mine places where all students can thrive.

The responsibility to stand for equity and to protect the spaces that have changed my life and the lives of so many others is one I do not take lightly. I urge you to reject this bill and stand on the right side of history: on the side of diversity, inclusion, and the future of every student and their right to be a citizen of this country that values freedom and opportunity for all.

Thank you for your consideration,

Elshaddai Melaku