

Testimony of Sara Dorsten
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 Sara Dorsten, and I am a graduate student and educator of English, specializing in disability studies, at the University of Cincinnati. I have 14 years of experience learning in and teaching at both private and public Ohio universities. I do not represent the University of Cincinnati but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen.

I am opposed to SB1. Though SB1 takes our legal language back to the nineteenth century by singling out issues related to gender and race, as many testifiers stated in February, DEI affects a broader demographic of citizens than the bill indicates at face value. To assert that SB1 will only impact initiatives related to race and sex is to ignore how bad actors will interpret DEI writ large, especially given how DEI is currently being treated at the national level. My testimony will address the disabled demographic that SB1 will impact through collateral damage.

Defining “controversial belief or policy” as “any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy” will put my ability to teach factual information at risk and empower students with inaccurate beliefs against me. I am particularly concerned about my ability to teach about crucial disability topics, given the state of opinion regarding disability at the national level. As a woman with autism and ADHD, I will be under threat on multiple fronts. Take, for example, President Trump’s nomination of Robert F. Kennedy Jr for the position of Secretary of Health and Human Services. RFK Jr is an anti-vaccine activist that has claimed—despite decades of research to refute this—that vaccines cause autism. This is patently false, and even if people don’t understand the science behind vaccines, they can rely on historical evidence that autism existed before vaccines were even invented. Just last semester a student claimed in an essay that vaccines cause autism, and I had to correct them. What would have happened if SB1 were in effect at that time? The student, interpreting my correction as a mere opinion about a “controversial belief or policy” rather than a verifiable fact could report me or unfavorably rate me during evaluations, especially if evaluations are to include the question, “Does the faculty member create a classroom atmosphere free of political, racial, gender, and religious bias?” The student’s complaint may not hold up in the long run, but time and resources would be wasted in the meantime

and further stress placed on educators, especially when universities are required to “respond to complaints from any student . . . about an alleged violation of the prohibitions.”

Furthermore, I am at risk because of people’s opinions of me as an autistic woman. I am constantly vigilant about how I communicate with people because autistic people have a reputation for being blunt. I don’t want to hurt my students’ feelings, especially when I give them feedback on assignments, but I can’t control how they interpret what I write. Based on experience, people in my life have willfully misinterpreted what I’ve said because they didn’t like how I said it, even though I walked on eggshells with my language. Students who are ableist about autism, or sexist about a woman speaking bluntly, or are simply angry that I gave them an 80% on an assignment have already lashed out at me. I can only assume that bad actors will use SB1 against me if given the chance.

Overall, SB1 disrupts professors’ intellectual authority about the subjects they spend decades researching and gives disproportionate power to students who do not have depth of knowledge on the subject. The reality is that university students are not being indoctrinated by professors. SB1 ignores the agency that students already have over their own learning. They choose between public and private universities. By enrolling in a degree program, they agree to take the classes required by their major. While earning their degree, they choose what classes they want to take based on the course offerings. In the class itself they often get to choose their research topics. Any professor worth their salt wants students to pursue research that interests them because that’s what gets them invested in learning. To believe that students are indoctrinated by universities is to ignore all of the choices students make along the way. Intellectual freedom is preserved through the choices students make to enroll in a class, drop it if they choose, negotiate an alternative class to make up credits, speak up in class discussion, pick a research topic, and so on. SB1 is an unnecessary piece of legislation that pits disgruntled students against educators and infantilizes students by assuming that they learn against their will.