

Testimony of Alexandra Oetzel, AIA, NCARB, LEED AP BD+C  
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 Alexandra Oetzel, and I am a professor of architecture at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for three years. I am also a graduate of the Knowlton School's B.S. Architecture program (2018). I do not represent The Ohio State University but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen.

I testify today in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1 (SB 1), a bill that seeks to fundamentally alter the operations of state institutions of higher education in Ohio. This bill is a direct assault on academic freedom, faculty governance, and institutional autonomy, all of which are foundational to a thriving and dynamic higher education system. As a land grant scholar and first-generation college student, I have directly benefited from the very programs and policies that SB 1 seeks to eliminate and am able to stand before you today as living proof of the transformative powers of Ohio's public universities.

SB 1's prohibitions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, restrictions on faculty speech, and the imposition of politically motivated curricular mandates constitute an overreach by the state into academic affairs. This bill would not only hinder Ohio's ability to compete nationally for top faculty and students, but it would also undermine the integrity of our institutions.

First, the bill's provisions banning DEI offices, training, and certain scholarships infringe upon principles of free speech and faculty governance. These initiatives, which are lawful under federal civil rights laws and Supreme Court precedent, support historically marginalized groups and promote an inclusive learning environment. Eliminating them would have detrimental effects on student success, faculty recruitment, and institutional reputation.

Furthermore, SB 1 mandates that state institutions of higher education refrain from endorsing or opposing controversial beliefs or policies, effectively restricting faculty and administrators from engaging in necessary academic discourse. This restriction contradicts the very purpose of higher education: to foster critical thinking and informed debate. As educators, we must be free to challenge prevailing ideas and expose students to a broad spectrum of perspectives.

Additionally, the bill's elimination of political and ideological litmus tests in hiring, promotion, and admissions decisions is a misleading provision. In practice, it would prevent universities from considering a candidate's commitment to diversity, inclusion, or equal opportunity—principles that are essential to fostering an equitable academic environment. This provision

would likely discourage faculty and students from underrepresented backgrounds from pursuing careers in Ohio's higher education system.

The bill also introduces punitive measures that allow the General Assembly to withhold or reduce funding to institutions found to be in noncompliance. This provision effectively coerces universities into conforming to political ideologies rather than fostering independent, research-driven decision-making. The potential financial repercussions threaten the stability of Ohio's higher education institutions and their ability to serve students effectively.

Finally, the proposed changes to faculty evaluations, post-tenure review policies, and collective bargaining rights undermine the fundamental principles of shared governance. These measures strip faculty of essential protections and diminish the appeal of Ohio's universities as desirable places to teach and conduct research. At a time when retaining top-tier faculty is more competitive than ever, this bill places Ohio at a distinct disadvantage.

In conclusion, SB 1 represents an unprecedented state intrusion into academic freedom and institutional governance. It threatens the ability of Ohio's colleges and universities to educate students in a free and open intellectual environment. For these reasons, I urge the members of this committee to reject Senate Bill 1 in its entirety.

Thank you for your time and consideration.