

Testimony of Katherine Anne Conner

Before the House Higher Education Committee

Representative Tom Young, Chair

March 10, 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 submit my written testimony today. My name is Katherine Anne Conner, and I am urging you to vote NO on Senate Bill 1. While I testify today as a private citizen, I am here to share survey results and graduate student concerns regarding SB1/HB6, which were collected by the Council of Graduate Students at The Ohio State University. In my role as the Vice President of the Council of Graduate Students, I have heard grave concerns from our constituents that will be helpful in informing your considerations as you make your decisions regarding SB1. In a survey distributed to all 11,000+ graduate students by CGS, 788 students reported their thoughts on SB1.

While my colleague Sabrina Durso (CGS's President) will be testifying and focusing more on the impacts and concerns with regard to teaching and research (academic freedom), I'd like to focus more on our collected data concerning personal freedoms, namely those of free speech, free religion, free assembly, and free petition/redress, which you might recognize as those being protected by the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. In the distributed survey, graduate students were asked about their impressions on the impacts of SB1, their current experiences at OSU with free speech, academic freedom, and free expression, and their concerns/views about their likely experiences were SB1 to pass and be adopted into law. When asked about their impressions on the impact of SB1 on academic freedom at OSU, 91% express

that they feel SB1 will have negative impacts, with 84% of survey respondents expressing they feel the bill will have “overwhelmingly negative” impacts. With regard to impacts on free expression at OSU, 92% express that they feel SB1 will have negative impacts, with 86% of survey respondents expressing they feel the bill will have “overwhelmingly negative” impacts. Our constituents were not only able to provide feedback on numeric scales (as in the questions above on a Likert scale of 1-7), but additionally submit qualitative comments to share further thoughts, details, and questions they might have to lend additional context to their broad numerical responses. In their comments on academic freedom and free expression at OSU, many survey respondents explicitly state they are concerned about their protected rights to free speech on campus and in the broader state of Ohio. There is confusion as to how a bill that purports to “protect” academic freedom and individuals’ freedoms in fact severely restricts students’ ability to share their honest thoughts, ask questions about others’, and engage in thoughtful and open debate about differing ideologies, perspectives, and opinions. Many expressed confusion over why the bill was written, as they characterize it as “a solution in search of a problem”. Some expressed that although they characterize their own personal views as moderate or conservative, they came to Ohio (specifically OSU) rather than states like Texas, Florida, and others specifically because of the encouraged rigorous debate of ideas, and the lack of restrictions on those freedoms. Some additionally state that they’ve already had programs lose prospective faculty and students who expressed concerns over the pending legislation, and not wanting to end up stuck in a state that actually artificially restricts their work (research and teaching), education (coursework and field of study), and personal freedoms under the guise of “protecting” them.

Turning to current graduate student experiences of teaching, research, and personal experiences at OSU, and the perceived changes to those experiences were SB1 to pass, the outlook is grim. When asked about what graduate students are experiencing/have experienced currently at Ohio State, 73% of the respondents stated that they feel safe to express their political ideology on campus. Crucially, 84% of survey respondents currently feel their political beliefs are respected by their graduate peers, and 82% feel those same beliefs are respected by Ohio State faculty (their advisors, thesis and degree committees, instructors, mentors, etc.). These results indicate that while there are some that do not feel completely able to express beliefs or opinions, the majority of respondents do not feel or see the indoctrination this bill claims exists. It is also important to consider whether or not the bill will actually address this issue, or whether this bill will simply lead to a whole new (much larger) group of students who feel unsafe and unable to share their thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. In commenting on their ability to share beliefs and whether they feel respected by faculty and peers, graduate student respondents shared that they are concerned about their abilities to engage fully with their peers and faculty if they were restricted in their ability to respond, and what impacts this might have on their quality of education, and ability to empirically engage with complex and nuanced issues and subjects.

When asked how Ohio State graduate students would feel about the same above factors in their education and experiences at OSU if SB1 were to pass, there is notable concern about how we might be able to express our political ideology, as 87% of the graduate student respondents stated they would not feel safe to express their political ideology on campus. Additionally, if SB1 were to pass, 39% would not feel their political beliefs would be respected by their peers, and 47% feel those same beliefs would not be respected by Ohio State faculty. So, while the majority

of respondents feel they would be respected by their peers and faculty if SB1 were to pass, there is a marked increase in concern and feelings of lack of respect in that these same respondents would be worried to express any type of political ideology on campus if this bill were to pass. In their detailed comments, graduate students stated that they would be scared or unable to speak on much of anything at all, for fear that any of their words might be misheard, taken out of context, or misinterpreted as being in violation of this bill. Many asked questions about how this bill would be applied when students were in a classroom setting as students versus as teachers, and how this “shakes out” for graduate student instructors when they were not in their classrooms, but might still be overheard by undergraduate students while engaged in personal conversations. Others shared concern that this bill and any following reporting mechanisms associated might be used in acts of retribution or vengeance against students or faculty, not to report actual violations of the bill, but in order to slander others and sow dislike, distrust, and professional ruin against others in return for personal slights or poor grades in matters unrelated to the bill’s focus.

It is clear through even this small glimpse into the current experiences and concerns of graduate students that there are a multitude of complex and valid concerns with regard to the motivations, focus, impacts/outcomes, and enforcement of this bill were it to be passed and then become law. And as we know, many actions can have unintended (and detrimental) consequences. Based on the feedback (both quantitative and qualitative) we’ve received, it is clear that this bill will have impacts that ripple out beyond OSU and other campuses into the communities that they occupy and beyond. Fewer students means lower revenues and customers for local businesses that rely on these dollars for prosperity. It means less innovation, fewer new

businesses, and lower overall competitiveness for Ohio as an economy as compared to its immediately neighboring states, the larger Midwestern region, and nationally.

If you value recruiting and retaining top talent to ensure our status as a state where researchers and educators of the highest caliber come to learn and educate, if you value Ohio's reputation as the home of welcoming, open, and curious intellectual engagement, if you value Ohio's history of free speech, academic freedom, and free expression, and if you value Ohio's economic prosperity, please vote NO on Senate Bill 1. Thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today.