

Testimony of Cathy Wagner (PhD)
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 Cathy Wagner and I am a professor of English at Miami University, where I have taught for 17 years. I do not represent Miami University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen and as the mother of a college-age student. I appreciate your commitment to educating Ohio students. I am here to express my opposition to Senate Bill 1.

First, in the absence of more funding from the state, out-of-state and international students provide a great deal of the **revenue Ohio higher ed needs for its survival**. My colleagues and I are currently working to recruit undergraduate and graduate students and we are already receiving questions from students because they have heard about SB 1. Students want to know whether they will feel safe and welcome here; they doubt that they will, and they are choosing to go elsewhere. Ohio legislators are creating a beast of a budget problem for higher ed at the same time that enrollments are falling because of birthrates. We are shooting ourselves in the foot if we pass this legislation.

Second, regarding the “**intellectual diversity**” mandate in combination with the strictures on “controversial” topics: It is unclear what range of “perspectives” will sufficiently count as intellectually diverse. The effect will be to encourage instructors to avoid addressing so-called controversial topics at all for fear of breaking the rules. Students will emerge with a blinkered understanding of the world that higher education should instead be opening up for them. These provisions supposedly intended to open up discussion will in fact shut it down.

Third, the provisions regarding **retrenchment and post-tenure review** create a sense of precarity that annihilates academic freedom. This will not just have immediate impacts on what students learn, but will make Ohio less attractive to future faculty and students, leading to the “brain drain” we are seeing in other states that have passed similar legislation.

Fourth, the strike ban and removal of **rights to collectively bargain** on retrenchment and tenure are discriminatory against higher ed workers. These are basic rights all workers are owed.

Finally, regarding the **DEI provisions** in the bill: I assume you would not want businesses in Ohio to be constrained in hiring and training employees to do the particular work they do. DEI in higher education is not an ideology, it is a competency, a skill set, that employees need to have in order to do our jobs well. In higher education, especially in public higher education, faculty and administrators are responsible for educating a diverse population. If we are creating

environments that are exclusionary, many students will find it more difficult to learn. This is demonstrably clear from climate surveys of students and is connected to dropout rates. When students drop out, the resources the state has put into higher education for that student are wasted. If higher education in Ohio is to function efficiently and perform its mission effectively, its institutions must be as free as any business in Ohio to identify the competencies and skills its employees need and to provide training to ensure they do their jobs properly.

This bill deserves to be shelved permanently. My colleagues and students and I would welcome genuine enhancements to higher education in Ohio, and to that end, I invite the representatives on the House higher education committee, along with Senator Cirino, to visit Miami University to visit classes, shadow faculty, and talk with students so that you can see the work that we do. I guarantee that you would pass an entirely different “higher ed enhancement” bill.

Thank you for your consideration.