

Good Morning, Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Members of the Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Jesús Alberto Valencia. I am a proud Ohio native, a first-generation Mexican-American student, and a sophomore at The Ohio State University. Today, I stand before you not just as a student, but as someone who has spent their entire life fighting to be in spaces like this—where decisions are made about people like me, often without us in mind.

Before I ever dared to believe I could stand here today, I was just a lost kid who didn't know if college was even possible. I was the son of two middle-class parents who have worked themselves to the bone for decades, so that I could have the opportunities they never did. I was the student sitting in classrooms where no one else looked like me, where history books barely mentioned people with my background, where I was constantly reminded—whether through words or silence—that these spaces weren't made for me.

Yet, I excelled. I worked harder. I earned my place in honors programs, took on leadership roles, and became a student ambassador, representing schools that never truly represented me. I sat in AP and College Credit Plus classes where I was one of the only Latino students, balancing school, work, extra-curriculars, and family responsibilities, all while navigating a system that was never designed with people like me in mind. I transferred between districts, from Columbus City Schools to the Diocese of Columbus to Dublin City Schools, seeing firsthand how opportunities and resources were distributed unequally. No matter where I was, I always found myself in the same position—having to prove that I belonged.

And for so long, I believed that if I just worked hard enough, I could overcome that feeling. That if I earned the highest grades, got into the best programs, and said all the right things, I wouldn't have to question

my place in these institutions. But the truth is, no amount of personal success can erase the systemic barriers that exist for students like me. No matter how much I achieved, there was always a lingering question: *Does he really belong here?*

It wasn't until I got to Ohio State and found communities built through Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives that I finally had an answer: *Yes, I do.*

DEI programs weren't about giving me an unfair advantage. They were about giving me a fighting chance. They were about showing me—and countless other students from marginalized backgrounds—that we are not alone, that we deserve to be here just as much as anyone else. They provided me with mentors who saw potential in me before I could see it in myself, resources that helped me navigate an institution that wasn't built with students like me in mind, and the courage to take up my rightful space alongside my peers.

Because of this, I have been blessed to serve as a Student Senator of OSU's Student Government, representing over 30,000 students. In this role, I have worked across differences, alongside students from all backgrounds and political ideologies, to advocate for policies that uplift our peers and ensure that Ohio State remains a place where every student—no matter their race, income, or background—has a fair shot at success. I have also had the privilege of serving as a Legislative Intern in the Ohio House of Representatives, assisting in advocacy efforts for over 120,000 constituents, many of whom share stories like mine.

Beyond these roles, I have sought every opportunity to grow as a leader and give back to the communities that raised me. I have engaged in volunteer initiatives that support underserved individuals, worked on outreach efforts to connect marginalized communities with resources, and was able to represent Ohio State at a National Student Diversity Convention, where I met others who, like me, have spent their lives fighting to be heard.

And yet, despite all of this, I am still standing here today having to justify why people like me belong in higher education.

Senate Bill 1 threatens to erase the very programs that gave me the confidence to step into leadership, to speak out, to believe that my voice matters. It seeks to silence the very professors who encouraged me to think critically, to challenge injustice, and to take pride in who I am and where I come from. My experiences in courses centered on diverse perspectives have not only made me a better student but have shaped me into a better leader—one who listens, learns, and strives to uplift others. Without these educators, without these programs, I would not be here today. And I fear for the students who come after me—students who may never get the chance to realize their full potential because the support systems that once existed for them have been dismantled.

Meanwhile, legacy admissions—policies that overwhelmingly benefit students whose families have generational privilege—remain untouched. Legacy students are invited to special events, given advantages in the admissions process, and granted opportunities that students like me could only dream of. This is not about fairness; it is about power. It is about deciding who gets to belong and who does not.

If DEI is erased from our universities, the message will be clear: that students like me do not deserve to take up space, at least not in Ohio. That no matter how hard we work, no matter how much we accomplish, we will always be outsiders in institutions that were never built for us.

I urge you to consider the human impact of this bill. It is not just words on a page—it is the futures of students like me, who have fought tooth and nail to be here. I mean, look around. Do you really think all these individuals, these students, these American citizens, would be inside a building at 9 am on such a lovely Tuesday if it weren't for just how much they truly disagree with the passing of this bill? It is the difference between an Ohio that welcomes talent and an Ohio that pushes it away. Please, do not be the reason that the next generation of diverse,

hardworking students feel they have no place in this state. If not for all these factors, do it so we can show that team up North we out-talent them in more than just football.

And I want to leave you with a bit of my personal story in shared governance from my time in Student Government: While my colleagues and I may not see eye to eye on every initiative, we always make sure to remind ourselves that our biases should not dictate the collective good of those who we not only have the duty of representing, but who have elected us to be in these positions in the first place—those who will truly face the consequences of our decisions. I hope you remember this as you think about passing this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration.