

## Opponent Testimony for Ohio Senate Bill 1

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of the Ohio House Workforce and Higher Education Committee

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Wilaini Alicea, and I am a second year International Affairs and Criminal Justice student at the University. I am here, expressing my strong opposition to Senate Bill 1. I would especially like to comment on the language regarding Statements of Commitment (pages 20-21), Controversial Beliefs or Policies (pages 21,24), DEI Bans (pages 22-24, 41, 44), and the Full-Time Faculty Strike Ban (pages 68-69).

As a full-time student and dedicated peer leader, this bill strikes at the very foundation of my education and undermines the capacity to support my student body. At the University of Cincinnati, we pride ourselves on providing higher education to students coming from over 130 countries. To reduce the profound principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion to a mere acronym is to ignore the complex and multifaceted impact these values hold within higher education. These principles are not abstractions but living elements that shape the lived experiences of students, faculty, and staff at the University of Cincinnati.

I come before you with the recognition that this bill is not only inherently contradictory but, frankly, written with malice which cannot be ignored. Written in S.B No. 1 page 21 section. 3345.0216 clause A5 states “The institution declares that its duty is to treat all faculty, staff, and students as individuals, to hold them to equal standards, and to provide them equality of opportunity, with regard to those individuals' race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.” Yet, in the same document, it contradicts this commitment by later defining “controversial belief or policy” as any belief or policy that stirs political controversy. Including “diversity, equity and inclusion”, a term that until now, has been a cornerstone in our pursuit of justice and equality. How can we claim to commit to equality of opportunity when the very tenets that support this ideal (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and identity) are rendered controversial and thus prohibited from open discussion?

This bill ultimately diminishes the very purpose it purports to serve, but what was its true intention? What is the endgame of restricting the conversations that form the basis of our educational journey? How can I, with any integrity, explain to my students that they are not permitted to learn about their own identities and the very forces shaping their lives? This bill fosters a climate of fear surrounding diversity, equity and inclusion; values that were chosen by us and are critical in expanding our intellectual diversity and understanding of each other. How can we claim to ensure that the needs of students across the state of Ohio are addressed, when the systems built to protect and support us are being deconstructed. The systems that have, for decades, labored towards the access of higher education, a sanctuary for all. Furthermore, systems which have uplifted and sustained communities who have historically been marginalized, underrepresented and underserved.

Taking my words into consideration, I want this respective committee to answer to themselves, how can we, as a state, “declare duty” to uphold equal standards, when the very essence of that declaration is being stripped from us and deemed controversial. It is not controversial to honor and respect the individuality of each person, or to safeguard their right to hold differing viewpoints. What is controversial and profoundly damaging is the attempt to silence the celebration of diverse perspectives, to undermine cultural awareness and to curtail the fundamental right to free expression enshrined in the First Amendment. To do so is not only an infringement upon the intellectual autonomy of students but a grave disservice to the ideals of education itself.

I stand before you today to advocate for the preservation of intellectual diversity and autonomy; which are not abstract ideals but are the foundations to higher education. Foundations that ensure that higher education here in the state of Ohio is not a monologue, but an ongoing dialogue that represents a multiplicity of voices. Voices of students like myself, along with those of faculty, and staff, who each contribute unique lived-experiences, and worldviews.

I ask you to consider my testimony and urge that you vote NO on Senate Bill 1.

Thank you for your time today and thank you for allowing me to testify.