

Testimony of Joel Wainwright, PhD
before the House Workforce and Higher Education Committee.

Written 9 March 2025 for session on 11 March 2025

Chair Young, Vice Chair Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and Committee members:

1. My name is Joel Wainwright. I am a Professor of Geography at Ohio State University where I have taught for 19 years. I do not represent Ohio State University. I submit this testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1 and House Bill 6 (hereafter SB1/HB6).
2. I oppose this legislation for many reasons, but given time constraints, I will only emphasize one element. For many reasons, this legislation threaten the prospects for Ohio's economic growth.¹ Much could be said about the direct and tangible ways that this bill will hurt our economy², but I would like to emphasize an indirect and intangible—but nonetheless fundamental—negative consequence of these bills for Ohio's economy. This concerns branding.
3. It is well known that consumer decision making is shaped by assumptions made based on brand. Since consumers lack perfect information, they make decisions based on estimations of the quality of the commodities they find in the market. This explains why firms spend a lot of time and money trying to increase the value of their brand. Brand awareness and positive identification translates into economic value.

¹ The proposed legislation “will damage the Ohio economy by undermining the state’s innovation and technology capacity housed in the Ohio university system” (Dr. J. Clark, testimony before the Senate Higher Education Committee, February 2025).

² For instance, by making Ohio State less competitive in competitions for research grants and recruitment of top researchers. Consider that, in FY2019, Ohio State’s operational expenditures totaled \$8 billion and Ohio State supported \$9.7 billion of industry output in Ohio: ERIK (2020) “The Economic Impact of The Ohio State University”.

4. I put it to you that no firm from Ohio has ever generated the awareness and positive identification presently enjoyed by Ohio State University. Of course, this is partly due to our outstanding student athletes. But not only this: Ohio State is ranked among the best research universities in the entire world, one that generates, every year: tens of thousands of well-educated graduates; innovative ideas, patents, and spin-offs; and a billion dollars' worth of research spending. Every firm in Ohio benefits from the positive associations that people hold of Ohio State. It is the closest thing we have to a state brand. Florida has Disney; California has Silicon Valley; we are Buckeyes.
5. The people of Ohio know that the changes we have seen in Ohio's economy since the 1980s—a transition from a depressed, declining rust belt state to a demographically stable State with a growing economy—has centered on Columbus and pivoted around the knowledge economy to which Ohio State is central. In a word, the rebranding of the State of Ohio required our state's greatest brand: Ohio State.
6. Now, this bill will damage that brand and break apart these synergies. Instead of showing the world that Ohio is a State that welcomes open inquiry, it says that we are afraid of sensitive topics. Instead of investing further in world-class research capacities, it would create new bureaucracies to tie us down. Instead of opening the door to the best and brightest from around the world, it projects a vision of a community fearful of inclusion.
7. Our ability to win future investments in high-tech production in Ohio requires, before everything else, good marketing—we need people to associate this place with success. But this bill would tarnish Ohio's brand.
8. So, the question you must ask yourself is this: what do you want people to think when they hear the word "Ohio"? If you want to revive memories of the 1980s and a declining rust belt state, then pass this bill. But if you want to project strength and confidence and a high-tech knowledge economy, you must vote against it.