

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Smitha Rao, and I am a scholar and educator at Ohio State and live in Columbus OH. I do not represent any institution and am submitting this testimony as a resident and private citizen of Ohio in opposition to Senate Bill 1 and its companion bill, HB6.

I moved to Ohio in 2021 and have consistently been in awe and proud of my students and faculty/staff colleagues who work tirelessly each day to advance the highest standards of education and provide a learning environment that cultivates the best in each of us. I have found students and colleagues from all backgrounds, all political and cultural beliefs and identities, work together to respect and lift each other up. I have seen many fellow Ohioans' eyes light up when talking about higher education and its role in building Ohio's communities and the country up. Therefore, admittedly, it has been a source of disbelief about why this bill and its predecessor (SB83) have so consistently missed the point of higher education and what is needed to strengthen it. Ohio's education needs freedom, more funding opportunities, not cuts (or coercions), and greater investment and trust in the pursuit of knowledge building.

The provisions of the bill are inherently contradictory. For one, the bill names an imaginary indoctrination of students calling for "intellectual diversity"- a term that has widely and disingenuously been employed to distract from what it is: a contraction of intellectual thought and ideas and muzzling of dissenting voices- while dictating key content and ideas that should or should not be included in the university curriculum. The proponents wrongly assume Ohio's classrooms and universities are not already spaces that host a broad range of topics and ideas that students are exposed to. University classes that I have been part of have been rich spaces for discussion and learning. Students and faculty bring their life experiences to create knowledge that is ever-growing and expanding. Here, intellectual debates and discussions are the norm; new ideas are introduced, challenged, and reconfigured constantly. That is the point of education. Ohio's educators and students already discuss and engage with many facets of ideas and topics; these ideas are not "controversial." Students today are well-informed, curious, and critical. They challenge each other and us, and I learn with and from them each day. They recognize the root causes of many of society's problems, including climate impacts and discrimination across multiple systems, and are driven to find a redress to these enduring challenges.

SB1 and HB6 block the pursuit of knowledge and undermine students, faculty, and research and scholarly endeavors. They are harmful to Ohio and will cause a drop in the number and kind of students who choose Ohio as their home for their academic journey. The worries espoused in the bill are not rooted in reality and the bill fails to recognize what actually occurs in universities. On an everyday basis, best practices in education and pedagogy are consistently evaluated and implemented. Courses, topics, and curricula in universities are arrived at after due process, including robust peer review, student demand, best practices, revisions based on existing and

emergent knowledge streams in the discipline, and responding to evolving issues as students prepare to be engaged citizens of the world.

I urge you to recognize the everyday realities of higher education, the expertise and best interests of educators and students, and uphold the principles of genuine intellectual and academic freedom. This is what will prioritize the future of our students and uphold Ohio's higher education and our place in history. I urge you to honor the democratic process, listen to people and your constituents, and vote no on this unnecessary bill.

I ask you to consider my testimony in opposition to this harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Smitha Rao