

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 1
Higher Education Committee
March 11, 2025
Ken Irwin

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Ken Irwin. I am a librarian at Miami University and I have worked in higher education in Ohio for over 25 years. I want to note that I am speaking for myself, not on behalf of the university. I oppose many features of the proposed legislation, but I will focus today on the ways the anti-DEI provisions of the bill work against the goal of workforce development for Ohio.

Chair Young has framed this bill as a workforce development bill – and that only works if students have the resources to help them thrive. Many programs under the umbrella of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” are aimed at recruiting and retaining students. We work with students who deserve to be here and help them navigate the challenges that could keep them from completing their studies. By banning all DEI programs, this bill would undermine the ways that we are able to support our students.

I have been involved in many DEI efforts in my library and at my university. The work we have done contributes to an environment that helps students and staff to thrive. My sense is that the bill is particularly interested in restricting any effort to involve race or gender in hiring or admissions, and I understand why you might want to legislate about those things. But that is not what most DEI programs are about. DEI is the practice of care at an institutional level – it is about building our community in ways that all of our students feel a sense of belonging. Some examples include:

- Touring campus buildings with students with disabilities to learn about barriers they face in navigating campus spaces so that we can fix the problems,
- Creating programming to support first-generation students, or students who are veterans or parents,
- Upgrading soundproofing in study rooms to support neurodiverse students,
- Student-created art with messages of welcome,
- Making sure events take students’ dietary needs into account.

Other programs may be aimed at supporting students from particular demographic groups. If we have a program to support first generation students or black men or LGBTQ students, it is not because they are being segregated or singled out as more or

less deserving – it is because we know that a sense of belonging is important to thriving. If there is a demographic difference that makes you feel out of place, then having a support group in which you are able to see the shared struggles and find inspiration from your peers, it makes the struggle more survivable.

By banning all DEI efforts, this bill would eliminate institutional structures that make our campus welcoming. I hope that many of the DEI activities I described are things you'd want our universities to do. I urge you to reconsider the scope of this bill, to include a definition of DEI so you are clear on what you intend to restrict, and to not ban more than you intend to.

Thank you. I'm happy to answer any questions.