

Ohio House Workforce and Higher Education Committee
Testimony on Sub.S.B.No.1
Stéphane Lavertu
March 19, 2025

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 comment on your efforts to improve Ohio’s public institutions of higher education. My name is Stéphane Lavertu. I grew up in Northeast Ohio and obtained a bachelor’s in political science from The Ohio State University in 2000. I also have a master’s in education policy from Stanford University and a PhD in political science from the University of Wisconsin. Since 2011, after a brief stint as a professor of political science at the University of Colorado, I have had the privilege of serving as a professor of public policy at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University.

My training and research have focused on American government, public bureaucracy, and the statistical evaluation of public policies and programs. Over the last decade, my research has focused primarily on the governance and operation of Ohio’s public schools (grades K-12) and on estimating the causal impact of public policies and administrative practices on student learning. Thus, in addition to my first-hand observation of the functioning of public higher education, my teaching and research deal directly with several of the issues that your legislation seeks to address.

I offer this testimony because, first and foremost, I care about Ohio and firmly believe in the value of higher education. I want all Ohioans to have the opportunity to live rich and meaningful lives, and Ohio State provided me with an extraordinary education that opened my mind and made my professional pursuits possible. Ohio’s public colleges and universities also play a critical role in developing and attracting talent, as well as generating innovations that can significantly improve the wellbeing of all Ohioans—regardless of whether they choose to pursue higher education.¹

At least as important, public colleges and universities play a critical role in shaping tolerant and well-informed citizens who understand and appreciate the relative peace and abundance that America’s political and economic institutions have brought us. The dramatic improvements in human wellbeing across the world over the last two centuries—after thousands of years of relative violence and poverty—is nothing short of miraculous.² America is at the center of this miracle, and the available evidence suggests that our economic and political institutions are responsible. It is critical that Ohio’s public colleges and universities help to strengthen our collective understanding and appreciation of how this outcome came to be.

¹ For a sweeping empirical assessment of the impact of universities, see Anna Valero and John Van Reenen. (2019). “The Economic Impact of Universities: Evidence from Across the Globe” *Economics of Education Review*, 68: 53-67.

² For a trove of evidence demonstrating this fact, one can consult this book: Steve Pinker. (2018). *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. New York, NY: Penguin.

My view, informed by academic study and professional observation, is that Substitute Senate Bill 1, on balance, would enhance Ohio public colleges and universities' ability to develop informed and responsible citizens, as well as their ability to serve as economic engines that help *all* Ohioans flourish. I have come to this conclusion for the following reasons:

1) Substitute Senate Bill 1 establishes a formal commitment to American public values on Ohio campuses.

Individual rights and freedoms are the foundation of America's political and economic institutions—the very institutions that have played a central role in delivering enormous improvements to human welfare. Market economies and democratic governments thrive when we value individuals, regardless of their sex, race, and ethnicity. Additionally, researchers and students learn more and are better able to hone their intellectual skills when they are exposed to and can freely consider a wider range of perspectives, regardless of whether some people find those perspectives objectionable and regardless of the sex, race, and ethnicity of those who espouse those ideas.

Like so many highly educated people across both the private and public sectors, many university professors and administrators lost sight of these truths over the past decades. Moreover, for a variety of reasons that extend well beyond Ohio's university campuses, this intolerance was embedded in formal university policies, operations, and cultures. **By requiring Ohio's colleges and universities to establish a formal commitment to fundamental American values such as equality and freedom of speech and thought, Substitute Senate Bill 1 would help us continue to right the ship (we have made considerable progress already) and should help prevent future intolerance that could cripple higher education.**

2) Substitute Senate Bill 1 empowers university leaders to manage public resources more effectively.

Educating citizens for civic and economic life is a central mission of Ohio's public colleges and universities. However, university leaders are severely constrained in their ability to realize this mission. These constraints are often understandable, as public officials must impose regulations to ensure that public organizations treat Ohioans fairly and that our tax dollars are spent appropriately (more on that below).

There are currently some constraints imposed on university leaders that are difficult to defend, however. University leaders should be better able to dismiss faculty if faculty perform poorly or if finances demand it. Otherwise, we are wasting money that could be spent on students, staff, and non-tenured faculty employees, or given back to Ohio taxpayers. **Substitute Senate Bill 1 would make personnel management more efficient—and help Ohio colleges and universities better realize their missions—by moderating the considerable influence of faculty.** I have in mind faculty like me, who are protected by tenure, can influence university governance in a variety of ways, and have a vested interest in protecting the status quo. Importantly, the bill seeks to do so in a balanced manner; that is, without eliminating faculty tenure protections (which afford me some fortification to speak freely in this testimony) or due process rights.

3) Substitute Senate Bill 1 should eventually enhance the public’s trust in higher education.

Confidence in U.S. higher education has plummeted over the last decade. Evidence suggests at least some public skepticism is due to the massive ideological bias among university faculty. As I previously noted, such bias undermines our educational mission because it limits the ideas to which students and faculty are exposed. But this bias also appears to have alienated many of our fellow citizens. For example, according to a recent Gallup Poll, the percentage of Americans who express a “great deal” of confidence in higher education has declined from 57 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2024. But this decline has been most precipitous among Republican respondents, whose confidence declined from 56 percent in 2015 to 20 percent in 2024.³

Substitute Senate Bill 1’s focus on fostering intellectual diversity should help address this problem in the long term. I believe that Substitute Senate Bill 1 also contributes to these efforts by increasing the extent to which Ohio’s elected officials—acting on behalf of Ohioans—are able to engage in the governance of our institutions of higher education. It would do so by increasing the frequency with which university trustees are appointed and providing these trustees with training that should enable them to be more engaged and effective in university governance. Finally, the bill should enhance public trust—and keep faculty and administrators honest—by requiring university administrators to report expenditures in finer detail and to make course syllabi publicly accessible. **My hope is that, through these provisions, Substitute Senate Bill 1 will reduce misunderstandings about what goes on at Ohio universities and force university administrators and faculty to engage in more meaningful dialogue with Ohio citizens and the elected officials who represent us.**

Concluding Thoughts

Substitute Senate Bill 1 is ambitious. Consequently, it contains provisions that some may find suboptimal, even if they agree wholeheartedly with its goals. For example, it contains some formal reporting requirements and regulations that add to the bureaucracy I lament. But it also removes some particularly unproductive bureaucracy and, most importantly, should enhance Ohio’s colleges and universities’ civic and economic missions. This, in turn, could yield very real benefits for all Ohioans, who deserve an educational system that works on their behalf. I think it is important for all of us to keep in mind the bigger picture when assessing Substitute Senate Bill 1’s value. I have heard a lot of criticisms that focus on particular “costs” that some of the bill’s provisions would impose, but with little acknowledgment of the countervailing benefits. I believe that this focus is a mistake.

My support of Substitute Senate Bill 1’s central aims should not be interpreted as a renunciation of Ohio State. Nearly everyone I interact with at OSU cares deeply about Ohio and the students we educate, and nearly everyone works exceptionally hard, regularly working nights, weekends, and holidays. The Ohio State University is truly world class. I tell my friends back home that the level of excellence they see on the football field is what I see in the office every day. I revere OSU and my academic unit, the John Glenn College of Public Affairs. My

³ Jeffrey M. Jones. (2024). “U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided: Nearly as many U.S. adults have little or no confidence as have high confidence” Accessed January 18, 2025 from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646880/confidence-higher-education-closely-divided.aspx>.

support for the central provisions of Substitute Senate Bill 1 is based on a firm belief that we should not be afraid to challenge ourselves to do even better for Ohio. Substitute Senate Bill 1 can help make Ohio's universities exceptional amidst a nationwide collapse in higher education.