

Chairman Young, Vice Chairman Ritter, Ranking Member Piccolantonio, and members of Ohio House Workforce and Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on Senate Bill 1.

My name is Spencer Mandzak, and I am a senior at Miami University. I am here today to express my strong support for Senate Bill 1, the Advance Ohio Higher Education Act. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on this important piece of legislation.

Senate Bill 1 represents a pivotal step forward in restoring balance, accountability, and intellectual diversity within Ohio's public higher education system. For too long, our colleges and universities have become environments where one-sided political ideologies dominate the academic discourse, often at the expense of open dialogue and differing perspectives. This bill seeks to ensure that Ohio's higher education institutions are places where true academic freedom thrives—where students are encouraged to think critically, question assumptions, and engage in meaningful debate without fear of reprisal or discrimination.

One of the bill's key provisions—the removal of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs—will help refocus our institutions on their core mission: providing high-quality education. The original goal of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives was to ensure that students and faculty from all backgrounds felt welcomed and supported in higher education. On the surface, that's a goal we can all support—creating an environment where students of different races, ethnicities, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds have access to the same opportunities and resources is an important aspect of a healthy academic community.

However, over time, DEI programs have shifted away from that original purpose of fostering inclusiveness and equal opportunity. Instead of promoting unity and mutual understanding, many DEI initiatives have adopted frameworks rooted in identity politics, which tend to emphasize differences rather than commonality. These programs often rely on concepts like implicit bias training, privilege-checking, and critical race theory—all of which categorize individuals based on race, gender, and other identity markers. This approach can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and create a sense of division rather than encouraging individuals to engage with each other as equals.

For example, mandatory DEI training sessions often focus on teaching students and faculty that systemic oppression defines most human interactions, even when no clear evidence of discrimination exists. Students and faculty are sometimes encouraged to identify themselves and others primarily through the lens of race, gender, or sexuality rather than as individuals with unique thoughts, talents, and experiences. This has led to an environment where disagreement with these perspectives is labeled as harmful or even bigoted, thereby chilling free speech and open debate.

Furthermore, the civics education requirement outlined in SB 1 will ensure that Ohio's students graduate with a solid understanding of American history, government, and constitutional principles. In an era where civic engagement and trust in our institutions are at historic lows, this requirement is essential for preparing students to be informed and active participants in our

democracy. Understanding the foundations of our republic and the rights and responsibilities that come with citizenship is not political—it's fundamental.

SB 1 also addresses the issue of faculty strikes and collective bargaining. Our public universities should prioritize the educational needs of students first and foremost. When faculty strikes disrupt learning, it is the students who suffer most. Establishing clear guidelines and limitations on collective bargaining will help maintain continuity in education and ensure that students receive the instruction they are paying for and deserve.

Critics of this bill argue that it will stifle free speech and limit diversity of thought. I would argue the opposite. By removing institutional bias and returning to a position of neutrality on controversial issues, we empower students to explore ideas freely and reach their own conclusions. True diversity of thought cannot exist when one viewpoint is elevated above others or when dissenting opinions are silenced. SB 1 creates an environment where students can engage in genuine intellectual exploration, free from the fear of being penalized for holding the "wrong" opinion.

Ohio has a proud tradition of academic excellence, but to maintain that tradition, we must ensure that our institutions are places where students are challenged, supported, and exposed to a range of perspectives. Senate Bill 1 is a necessary course correction that will strengthen our higher education system and prepare Ohio's students for success in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

Chairman Young, members of the committee, I urge you to support Senate Bill 1 and help restore balance and accountability in Ohio's public universities. Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.