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Senate Higher Education Committee
SB 1 Sponsor Testimony
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Chair Roegner, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, I am pleased to be here today as the sponsor of Senate Bill 1, The Advance Ohio Higher Education Act.

I have sponsored this legislation and its predecessor bill, SB 83, because I am committed to improving higher education at our 14 public universities and 22 community colleges. Why am I so committed? Because our students, parents, taxpayers, and businesses need us to put our very best foot forward when it comes to post-secondary education. We also know that Ohio's continued economic advances require this.

It is clear that the environment of academia has changed and is changing in many respects. Demographic trends are undeniable. There are far fewer high school graduates today and that will continue for a long time. Our institutions are also seeing their costs rise with inflation and often unnecessary administrative growth. They are also burdened with a large and sometimes unnecessary infrastructure requiring millions in deferred maintenance. Finally, we are already deep into workforce challenges. The lack of connection between academic programs and in-demand workforce will continue to be a challenge causing our institutions to scramble to adjust to these changing needs of our Ohio companies.

Much of Senate Bill 1 was debated in the last General Assembly along with extensive hearings in both chambers. As such, I will not review the entire bill this afternoon. Rather, I will summarize several of the main components and close with a discussion of 'diversity of thought' and why it is so important.

SB 1 is about more speech, not less.

It is about granting presidents and trustees more authority to make strategic adjustments in response to changing demands.

It is about better trained trustees.

It is about creating an environment of ‘continuous improvement’.

It is about the core value that students come first; they are the customers of these institutions.

It is about eliminating what has become institutional discrimination through the establishment and economic support of DEI programs. I view institutional discrimination as being an environment which has evolved over time at an academic institution through specific programming and departmental structures that limits the free expression of ideas, creating a space in which individuals may be treated adversely or silenced because of their race, gender, and/or beliefs.

It is about uninterrupted instruction and the sacred contractual bond that is formed between two parties who enter into a contract for instruction in exchange for payment. Why should a third party have the right to interrupt that contract from being fulfilled?

Now, I would like to present some thoughts on free speech on campus and why diversity of thought is imperative in the delivery of a proper education.

The Kalven Report of 1967 discussed the universities’ role in political and social action. One key section of the report states that, “the neutrality of the university as an institution arises then not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity. It arises out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints.”

John Dewey wrote about this in 1904. He was also one of the founders of the American Association of University Professors. He believed that all theories should be examined and debated. He would certainly have been against the woke conformity we see on so many campuses and the clearly demonstrated liberal leanings of faculty and staff who will not tolerate alternative views. The result is that the students are being denied the opportunity to be exposed to other views, and that leads to indoctrination.

I should also mention the famous Chicago Principles. Many universities have adopted these principles, at least on paper. In 2014, a report from the University of Chicago's Committee on Freedom of Expression states that the university is committed to free, robust, and uninhibited debate and deliberation among all members of their university community. They believe that free expression is essential to the university's culture. You cannot have that if only one side of the debate is presented. That is why we need diversity of thought not just to be tolerated, it must be policy.

Opponents have accused SB 1 of stifling academic freedom. This is patently untrue. In actuality, restoring and ensuring academic freedom at our state institutions of higher education is one of the main objectives of this bill.

In closing, with the success of our five independent civics institutes and their continued appropriation and the passage of SB 1, Ohio will be at the top of the heap in higher education reform. Contrary to the reckless predictions of opponents, faculty and students will rush to Ohio because we will have established an environment of true diversity of thought. Faculty, administrators, trustees, and students should embrace this legislation and join our effort to make Ohio's higher education the very best it can be. Students and faculty will rush in to be a part of it.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. I am happy to take questions.