

Michael Clune
Testimony on Ohio Senate Bill 1
January 29, 2025

My name is Michael Clune; I am the Knight Professor of the Humanities at CWRU. The views I will express are my own, and do not reflect the views of my employer.

Thank you for inviting me here today to speak in support of those elements of Senate Bill 1 seeking to depoliticize Ohio universities.

Higher education faces an existential crisis. According to a much-cited poll by Gallup, between 2015 and 2023 public confidence in higher education declined by 20 points, to a historic low of 36 percent. The number one reason cited by poll respondents for their lack of faith in our universities is their perceived political bias. This perception reflects the fact that in the years since 2014 many universities and disciplines have begun to conceive of their mission in terms of partisan political activism. Symptoms of this change can be seen in the decision of venerable science journals like *Nature* to endorse presidential candidates, in the incessant pronouncements from university presidents on topics of political controversy, and in requirements in grant applications, peer review of manuscripts, tenure reviews, and hiring decisions that candidates explicitly show how their work advances political causes.

A decade ago, discussion of the politicization of academia was most common on the political right. This has changed. Two of the most noted investigations of higher education in the past year were conducted by liberal venues. The *New York Times*' expose of the DEI program at the University of Michigan revealed an army of highly paid administrators enforcing suffocating political orthodoxies while failing to meaningfully enhance diversity at the university. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s detailed reporting on conditions at Pomona college provides a second example. This, the most-widely read piece published by the *Chronicle* last year, shows the college administration's persecution of my close friend Aaron Kunin, who had the temerity to suggest in a scholarly publication that poetry should be judged on literary, rather than political merits. Every professor I have spoken to recognizes aspects of their own university in these stories.

In my view, primary responsibility for the unsustainable politicization of academia rests on bloated, unaccountable university administrations, which have instituted a "shadow curriculum" of politicized faculty and student training, hired teams of administrators to police speech, and incentivized the politicization of academic teaching and research. A key cause of skyrocketing college tuition—the second most cited reason for cratering public confidence—has been the explosion of university administrations in recent decades.

Our state and nation's intellectual, scientific, and cultural health depends on a university system dedicated to the pursuit of truth. Restoring public confidence in higher education should be a bi-partisan aim. No one—no matter what one's politics—benefits from the status quo. Many faculty members wish their work to have an impact on matters of public interest—from the climate to criminal justice to the arts. Yet our authority in such debates depends on our dedication to truth, to the methods and disciplines in which we are expert. By presenting our work in terms of political activism, we alienate at least half the population, cast doubt on the objectivity of our research and teaching, and become political liabilities to the causes we support.