

44TH HOUSE DISTRICT

LUCAS COUNTY, PORTIONS OF WOOD AND
OTTAWA COUNTIES

Committees

Energy, Finance, Judiciary, Rules
and Reference, Workforce and
Higher Education

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State Representative Joshua E. Williams
Ohio House of Representatives

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide proponent testimony on Senate Bill 1. My name is Representative Josh Williams, and I am currently serving in my second term in the Ohio House of Representatives, and as Majority Whip in House leadership. In addition, I practice as a criminal defense attorney and teach undergraduate criminal justice courses at Adrian College.

I come before you today in support of Senate Bill 1 because it seeks to protect both faculty members and, most importantly, students. Having recently graduated from law school in 2020 and now serving as a faculty member myself, I have personally observed the decline of open discussion and genuine intellectual exchange on college campuses.

When I began law school, I envisioned an environment that welcomed the free flow of ideas—where students, professors, and future professionals could debate and refine viewpoints on complex issues. Unfortunately, what I encountered was the opposite. Rather than fostering dialogue and debate, many higher education institutions prioritize conformity, actively discouraging perspectives that deviate from the prevailing narrative.

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One of my earliest classroom experiences in law school demonstrated this firsthand. During a conversation on administrative agencies and their role in the executive branch, I expressed my opposition to an open-border policy—an opinion I believed to be fairly mainstream, even at the time. However, this common-sense statement sparked a wave of hostility. A tenured professor at the University of Toledo College of Law, upon seeing my remarks on social media, likened my views to the ideology of the Nazi party. Encouraged by this professor's stance, several classmates piled on, calling me a Nazi, a slave trader, a traitor to my race, and an "Uncle Tom." One classmate went so far as to refuse to use my name, referring to me only as "the Nazi." Regrettably, such incidents are not unique. Whenever a dissenting perspective challenges the accepted campus dogma, the threat of harassment and marginalization quickly silences open discourse.

Beyond my experience as a law student, I have also witnessed how faculty hiring and disciplinary measures can discriminate against individuals with differing opinions. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) hiring practices, for example, sometimes emphasize criteria unrelated to a candidate's professional qualifications or the subject matter they will teach, undermining the educational interests of students. Similarly, faculty members who challenge the status quo risk retaliation or stunted career progression if their viewpoints are deemed unacceptable.

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Critics of Senate Bill 1 contend that it will suppress free speech; however, it is important to note that a de facto censorship regime already exists on many campuses. The bill aims to dismantle these entrenched restrictions by promoting transparency and accountability. One key provision requires students to evaluate faculty members not only on the quality of their teaching but also on whether classroom discourse remains free from undue bias. Moreover, Senate Bill 1 confronts the root issue by mandating that institutions of higher education adopt a mission statement explicitly affirming their commitment to open, honest intellectual inquiry—a commitment tied to their financial support.

In closing, I urge this committee to reflect on the current state of higher education: Are students from across the political and ideological spectrum encouraged to speak openly and critically about contentious issues? My experience shows that too often, the answer is no. By declining to act, we implicitly sanction a culture of intellectual intimidation in institutions that should be dedicated to knowledge and discovery. If given the opportunity I can speak more directly about why DEI needs to be removed from institutions of higher learning in Ohio. For the sake of our students and faculty, I respectfully request that you support Senate Bill 1. Thank you for your time and consideration.