

Testimony of Heather Norton, Ph.D. Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 11, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

Thank you for reading my testimony. My name is Heather Norton, and I am a professor of Anthropology at the University of Cincinnati. I do not represent the University of Cincinnati but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1. My comments below draw on my professional expertise and experience as a faculty member and researcher at a public Ohio university over the past fourteen years. Specifically, I am going to address the portion of the SB1 bill regarding “controversial beliefs”.

As a biological anthropologist, my expertise is in human genomics, evolution, and variation. In my classes, I teach about topics ranging from genetics, human evolution, the construction and impact of racial categories on health, and research ethics. In every class I teach, the goal is to develop students into critical thinkers who can weigh the evidence and reach their own conclusions. For example, in my courses that deal with human evolution, we discuss how scientists develop research questions (including how they are influenced by their own social setting), collect data to address those questions, and interpret those data. We talk about how conclusions can change in the face of new data, and why that is important to the scientific process.

In addition to teaching about scientific theories and methods, I also recognize that science, and scientists, do not operate inside a vacuum. We are products of the social environments that we are in, and these shape the research questions we ask and the methods we use to address them. As such, to not discuss the ways that issues related to race, environmental change or economic disparities contribute to the way scientific research is conducted and received promotes an incomplete and naïve worldview to our students. However, under SB1, the teaching of these concepts could fall under the category of “controversial beliefs”. As an educator, I do not expect my students to agree with everything I say—in fact, if they did so I would worry. But by enacting a bill that potentially limits the teaching and discussion of such concepts, this bill takes away the right for students to debate ideas and to critically test them for themselves. Homogenizing curriculum so that it passes a political purity test does not serve the students of Ohio and will result in a citizenry that is poorly prepared to meet the challenges of 21st century American society.

Finally, I will note that in 2024, the University of Cincinnati received over \$377,000,000 in sponsored research awards. This research is conducted by faculty researchers who were drawn to this state and its great universities because of the current academic freedoms that allow us to pursue cutting edge research, construct works of art and interrogate our past to learn more about our present. A law like SB1 will have a chilling effect on these academic freedoms, and the resulting “brain drain” when top-tier students and researchers elect to pursue education and careers in other states will have a long-term and detrimental effect on the state of Ohio.

I respectfully urge the Senate Higher Education Committee to vote “NO” on SB1.

