

Testimony of Jocelyn E. Nardo, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 10, 2025

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

My name is Jocelyn E. Nardo, and I am an Assistant Professor of Chemistry & Biochemistry at The Ohio State University. I do not represent The Ohio State University but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1. I am writing to express my strong opposition to Senate Bill 1, which seeks to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives and impose sweeping restrictions on intellectual discourse in Ohio's state institutions of higher education. I have dedicated my career to ensuring that STEM education is accessible and equitable for all students. This bill fundamentally undermines those principles, compromising academic freedom, faculty governance, and the mission of higher education as a space for critical inquiry and knowledge production. DEI programs exist not to impose ideology, but to ensure equal access to education, promote inclusive learning environments, and address systemic barriers that have historically excluded students based on race, gender, disability, and other identities. The prohibition on DEI-related training, scholarships, and job descriptions disregards empirical evidence demonstrating the positive impact of such programs on student retention, faculty success, and institutional excellence. DEI does not equal discrimination, rather it acknowledges inequities and seeks to mitigate them. Overall, dismantling DEI initiatives will further limit the participation of these students, weakening the future workforce and innovation in Ohio.

While this bill claims to promote intellectual diversity, it does the opposite by censoring discussions on race, gender, and systemic inequities. The language restricting "controversial beliefs" is vague and politically motivated, opening the door for ideological policing of faculty, students, and researchers. As an educator, I must be free to teach scientific integrity, historical accuracy, and social context without fear of political interference. Prohibiting institutions from taking stances on social, environmental, or political issues unless it concerns funding creates a chilling effect on discourse. Restricting faculty and students from discussing DEI principles while mandating the promotion of American capitalism in civic literacy courses demonstrates ideological inconsistency and government overreach into curriculum decisions. Additionally, the proposed post-tenure review and faculty evaluation systems are thinly veiled attempts to erode tenure protections, making it easier to remove faculty who engage in research or pedagogy that some find politically inconvenient. Tenure exists to protect academic freedom, allowing faculty to pursue research and teach without fear of political retaliation. This bill enables arbitrary termination of faculty based on ideological grounds, particularly targeting those engaged in social justice research, critical race studies, and equity-based pedagogy. The bill's elimination of collective bargaining rights for faculty evaluations, tenure, and retrenchment further erodes the rights of educators, placing them at risk of political interference and job insecurity.

While financial transparency is important, the bill's requirement that institutions publicly disclose spending on DEI-related programs singles out these efforts as inherently wasteful or controversial. This approach misrepresents the role of DEI in fostering student success and ignores the real financial challenges facing higher education, such as declining state funding. Chemistry, physics, and materials science rely heavily on global research networks to address urgent challenges such as climate change, medicine, and sustainable technology. Cutting off these partnerships based on political suspicion rather than scholarly merit is counterproductive to Ohio's standing as a research leader. In essence, SB1 is not about strengthening higher education but rather about silencing discussions on systemic inequities, undermining faculty autonomy, and dismantling efforts to make education more inclusive. It rejects evidence-based practices that have improved retention, representation, and research innovation, replacing them with politically motivated constraints on free thought, teaching, and institutional governance. As a scientist, educator, and advocate for inclusive STEM education, I urge you to reject SB1 and instead support policies that expand access, protect academic freedom, and uphold the fundamental mission of higher education, which is the pursuit of knowledge for the benefit of all.