

Testimony of Merrill Kaplan, 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 Merrill Kaplan, and I am a professor of Folklore and Scandinavian Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for nearly 20 years. I do not represent Ohio State but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

“Intellectual diversity”

SB1 requires sanctions of professors who do not adequately support “full intellectual diversity” in the classroom, but professors need to be able to cut off certain arguments in class to be able to teach. We need some established law, some precedent, some axioms on which to build the ideas we are teaching. Without the ability to lay that groundwork, all classes become introductory classes. Any student could demand a proof of $1+1=2$ and thereby derail a session that ought to have been about linear algebra. In some other class, $1+1=10$, because they have established at the outset that they are working in binary, and it is not up for debate. Teachers need to be able to teach advanced concepts that depend on less advanced concepts.

This is true in humanities and social sciences as well. When I studied Russian history with the brilliant and very conservative Professor [Richard Pipes](#) as an undergraduate at Harvard, I attended lectures that presented as a given that communism was an immoral and unworkable system of government. Not everyone in the class agreed with that axiom, but we listened and thought and learned an enormous amount about Russian and Soviet history. If Prof. Pipes were faculty at OSU in a post-SB1 world, he would have to hold the floor open for any and all voices that wished to opine otherwise about the morality and practicality of communism or risk poor student evaluations that could threaten his employment even after tenure. Everyone’s learning would be compromised, a missed opportunity to learn from an astonishingly learned scholar whose opinions were well informed (to say the least) but not uncontroversial.

Retrenchment:

I teach in small disciplines, and so it is no surprise that I am concerned by the language in SB1 that allows for the abolishment of small programs and departments and the termination of associated faculty. The popularity of a field of study among students at any given time is not a measure of the importance of expertise in that field of study. The importance of seemingly arcane knowledge can change suddenly. I study and teach about Scandinavia. I am the only professor in my field at OSU. My classes enroll well, but I cannot point to hundreds or even tens of graduating Scandinavian majors to justify my own employment. (In fact, there is no Scandinavian major at all.) Surely, mine is a niche discipline that could be trimmed away under SB1! And yet, just the other day on Air Force One, President Trump remarked, while discussing his intention to acquire Greenland from Denmark, "I don't really know what claim Denmark has to it." I may well be the only member of the OSU faculty who can answer that suddenly topical question. It is the mission of the university to cultivate and sustain expertise, including expertise that seems abstruse one moment but may be politically relevant the next.

Thank you for considering these thoughts. Please oppose SB1.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Merrill Kaplan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Merrill Kaplan

Professor of Folklore and Scandinavian Studies