

Opponent Testimony for Senate Bill 1  
Senate Higher Education Committee

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Dana Bisignani

Private Citizen

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee.

**Paragraph 1: Introduction and purpose**

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Dana Bisignani, and I am here today as a private citizen. I am a resident of Cincinnati, Ohio. The views I express here today are my own as an individual and do not reflect the views of my employer, the University of Cincinnati.

I am here today to strongly oppose SB1. In particular, several sections of this bill target my day-to-day work with students and criminalize an entire field of knowledge. Its passage will ensure only that vital resources will be removed from our universities, resources that support student success far beyond what I believe this committee has imagined.

**Paragraph 2: Personal connection/story**

I have been working in higher education for over 20 years. I have been employed both as staff, responsible for running a campus-based Women's Center, and as adjunct faculty, teaching courses in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. In both of these roles, my work is categorized under the broad umbrella "DEI."

The very mission of education is to provide individuals the opportunity to consider new ideas. Academic rigor is rooted in the process of holding our beliefs up against new ideas every day. If our beliefs are worth their muster, they will stand up to such tests. If not, we have the choice then to revise them, to change our minds, or to add to and build on our current beliefs, for, as I often tell my students, humans are capable of holding multiple truths at once. As such, learning must involve a certain amount of intellectual discomfort, which is necessary for intellectual growth, regardless of a person's identity, religious or political beliefs.

Yet this bill seeks to ban whole lists of ideas considered "division" or "controversial," such as "climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion, immigration policy, marriage or abortion. What I want to know is, how are we going to be required to teach students about the government if we cannot discuss electoral politics? What will political science majors do if foreign policy is off limits?

**Paragraph 3: Connect to broader community impact**

Section 8(a) of the bill (DEI Bans) "prohibits any diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This includes orientations, training, offices or departments, contracts with third parties to promote DEI, scholarships, or replacing any of the aforementioned with other things that serve similar purposes" and also "requires institutions to implement a range of disciplinary sanctions for any employee who authorizes or engages in DEI training."

This clause will almost certainly result in the closing of the Women's Center, along with our fellow identity-based centers on campus, all of which provide vital supports, resources, and knowledge on our campus. Let me make clear what our students would lose if these centers were to close:

- Trainings on salary negotiation skills for students of any gender
- Advocacy for student parents and their academic success
- Programs on eating disorders and body image, women's health, and sex education
- Support for survivors of sexual and intimate partner violence, regardless of gender
- Workshops on healthy relationships and navigating conflict
- Access to emergency contraception (aka Plan B):
  - Unintended pregnancy impacts not only the education and career trajectory of young women but also of their male partners.
- Employment, leadership, and internship opportunities for students both within our center as well as those we connect with leaders in the community through our programs.
- Our more than 100-year-old C-Ring leadership award, UC's longest-running award tradition, continuous since 1922 with 70 living awardees still in the community and around the country.

Our physical space, our resources, our trainings and programs have not once been requires in any context and have ALWAYS been open to students and employees of any identity. I have worked with young men, Jewish students and those who identified as pro-Palestine, with students who supported access to abortion and with those who do not. I have worked with survivors of gender-based violence of ALL genders who were seeking support and healing. I have worked with students of every race and ethnicity to discuss strategies to advocate for themselves in the workplace and negotiate their salary and benefits to ensure their future economic success.

In case it needs to be said, I have never once asked what a student's political or religious beliefs are when assisting them. We have never once turned away a student because of their beliefs or how they identified. We serve all students. But let me be clear: while all students will be impacted by the closure of such centers, those who will suffer disproportionately will be our women students, our queer and transgender students, student parents, and our students of color.

In case it needs to be stated, DEI is not a new trend or fad or buzz, though DEI and DEI educators have recently been vilified by both our state government and the new administration.

In case it needs to be stated, DEI encompasses not only conversations and trainings about race or ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity – those topics that seem most routinely vilified in conversations around this education. It is also:

- Ramps and sidewalk curb cuts
- Subtitles and captions on TV, films, and virtual meetings
- Family restrooms
- Changing tables in men's restrooms
- Breastfeeding and pumping stations and accommodations
- Pay equity and transparency
- Parental leave, both time and pay, for workers of any gender

- Not having to accept workplace harassment
- Work accommodations for a variety of disabilities
- Flexible work arrangements
- Size-inclusive chairs and beds in medical facilities and other institutions
- Culturally appropriate care and respect for dietary needs at hospitals and other medical facilities
- Being able to have medical professionals use your preferred name, which applies not only to transgender individuals
- Rooms to pray/meditate at work and other public spaces
- Employee resource groups
- Large print materials for those with visual disabilities
- Materials available in different languages
- Accessible bikes and public transit accommodations
- Company-covered behavioral/mental health resources
- Supports and resources for veterans at universities

In short, things we all benefit from.

What DEI is not is hiring an under qualified person for a job because of their race or ethnicity. What DEI is not is a dogma nor an indoctrination of students who have their own thoughts and their own minds. What DEI is not is a fear of hard conversations or disagreement – the very things needed for a rich and robust free marketplace of ideas.

#### **Paragraph 4: Reiterate purpose/call to action**

If SB 1 passed and our center closes, my staff, all of whom are supporting families, will lose their jobs. This includes both our undergraduate and graduate student workers. And what of other centers at universities across the state of Ohio, many of whom have already lost their jobs?

More than that, is the committee prepared to have an increase in student deaths on their hands? Student-facing centers like ours are often the first place that students come when their life goes sideways, when they experience a mental health crisis or other supports have fallen through. Suicide is currently the leading cause of death for teenagers. Without vital supports outside the classroom, how many students won't know where to turn? Is the committee prepared to support the gap created when universities lose tuition dollars because students choose universities outside Ohio?

On a final note, I have no issue with students at all levels of education being required to take a class on the workings of the U.S. government – not only federal government, but state, country, and local government as well. In fact, I would argue for the urgency of this knowledge now more than ever. I also have faith that students well-versed in how government works will also understand that this bill seeks to ban such education for arbitrary and capricious reasons in an attempt to legislate a problem that, in fact, does not exist.

I thank you for hearing my testimony and urge you to vote NO on SB1 in order to protect all the students who utilize these vital resources at universities across the state of Ohio and the education

workers who will lose their jobs and their livelihoods if this bill passes. Thank you. I'm happy to answer any questions.