

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Melanie Zaidel. I am a graduate student and astrophysicist. I am strongly opposed to SB 1 and its companion bill HB 6.

As an astrophysicist, I study collections of particles across the universe and the related physical processes that produce the beautiful celestial structures you see in telescopes. In addition to the astrophysical objects in our universe, people are also collections of particles. What makes us special as collections of particles is that we can think, share ideas, and work together. In that way, I often feel that people are part of the universe's way of experiencing itself. The universe has so much beauty to share with us, and that beauty should be shared with everyone.

Historically, as well as in contemporarily, there are systemic barriers that exclude people from underrepresented groups – people of color, people with disabilities, queer people, for example – from relishing in the universe's beauty at the academic level. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs are vital for allowing everyone the opportunity to study the stars. Not just in the field of astrophysics, these kinds of initiatives make future professionals from underrepresented backgrounds have mentors that relate to them, afford them accommodations for disabilities, and provide them vital financial support.

Personally, DEIA programs have made me a better educator and scientist. Students and researchers come from all kinds of different backgrounds, and in meeting and mentoring students who may not have studied astrophysics without the support from these kinds of programs, I have become more empathetic and patient as a teacher. Furthermore, DEIA programs allowed me to have my first ever teaching experience and showed me that I have a passion for teaching and a love for mentoring students. Finally, having a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and accessible research program ensures that scientists of all backgrounds can contribute to scientific inquiry and have their needs be seen and heard while discovering the universe.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this destructive bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.