



Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and all members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 1, and how it will undermine the education and training of counselors in Ohio, creating serious accreditation and licensure issues. The Ohio Counseling Association (OCA) is the professional association representing licensed professional clinical counselors, licensed professional counselors, and counselor educators throughout Ohio.

The Ohio Counseling Association firmly believes that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in higher education have provided valuable resources and increased awareness within these environments. There is no harm to students, professors, or the public who are exposed to DEI; in fact, many populations and individuals have found these initiatives to be supportive, insightful, and affirming. The provisions of SB 1 propose a complete ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion. While we certainly fear the consequences of such actions, the OCA aims to discuss and provide input regarding one impact of particular concern.

For counselors to become licensed and practice, they must complete education from an accredited counseling program. The standards for these programs are established by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The 2024 CACREP standards outline specific DEI requirements, which include the following:

Section 3: "...Ethical behavior, diversity, equity, inclusion, and critical thinking are integral to counselor preparation and should be infused throughout the curriculum. Diversity refers to all aspects of intersectional and cultural identity...Counselor education programs must document where and in what manner each of the numbered standards listed below is covered in the curriculum."

#### **B. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND EXPERIENCES**

1. theories and models of multicultural counseling, social justice, and advocacy
2. the influence of heritage, cultural identities, attitudes, values, beliefs, understandings, within-group differences, and acculturative experiences on individuals' worldviews
3. the influence of heritage, cultural identities, attitudes, values, beliefs, understandings, within-group differences, and acculturative experiences on help-seeking and coping behaviors
4. the effects of historical events, multigenerational trauma, and current issues on diverse cultural groups in the U.S. and globally
5. the effects of stereotypes, overt and covert discrimination, racism, power, oppression, privilege, marginalization, microaggressions, and violence on counselors and clients
6. the effects of various socio-cultural influences, including public policies, social movements, and cultural values, on mental and physical health and wellness
7. disproportional effects of poverty, income disparities, and health disparities toward people with marginalized identities

8. principles of independence, inclusion, choice and self-empowerment, and access to services within and outside the counseling relationship
9. strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and processes of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination
10. guidelines developed by professional counseling organizations related to social justice, advocacy, and working with individuals with diverse cultural identities
11. the role of religion and spirituality in clients' and counselors' psychological functioning"

If Ohio's counseling programs fail to meet these accreditation standards, they risk losing their accreditation, which would in turn jeopardize licensure pathways for future counselors. This isn't just a concern—it's a direct threat to Ohio's counseling workforce. DEI training is not optional in counselor education; it is a fundamental requirement for ensuring ethical, competent practice and preparing counselors to serve diverse populations. These course content requirements aim to help train and educate counselors to treat all kinds of patients. Ohioans of different races, genders, socio-economic classes, and backgrounds are in need of counseling support. Counselors must be objective, compassionate, and prepared to work with a multitude of people.

Another critical concern is how this provision could exclude Ohio from participation in the Counseling Compact. The Compact is a major step forward in expanding access to care, allowing licensed counselors to practice across state lines without unnecessary red tape. Ohio's legislation to enter the compact was enacted in 2022, thanks to the work by Chair Roegner. However, Compact states are legally required to maintain education and licensure standards that align with national accreditation bodies like CACREP. If Ohio's counseling programs fall out of alignment due to SB 1's restrictions, Ohio would be in noncompliance with the Compact, jeopardizing its ability to participate. This would create barriers for Ohio-licensed counselors by blocking their ability to practice in other Compact states, while also limiting access to mental health care for Ohio residents. This is a real, policy-based consequence that lawmakers should not overlook.

This issue regarding program accreditation was raised during the debate on Senate Bill 83 in the last General Assembly. The following language was included in that bill to address this provision that would jeopardize Ohio programs' accreditation.

- (1) Prohibit any mandatory orientation or training course regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, unless the institution determines the orientation or training course is exempt from that prohibition because the orientation or course is required to do any of the following:
  - (a) Comply with state and federal laws or regulations;
  - (b) Comply with professional licensure requirements;**
  - (c) Obtain or retain accreditation;**
  - (d) Secure or retain grants or cooperative agreements;
  - (e) Apply policies of the state institution of higher education with respect to employee or student discipline.

The training of professional counselors in Ohio is rigorous, and SB 1 introduces unneeded and ethically contraindicated government regulation into the education process. If enacted as proposed, SB 1 would jeopardize the quality of behavioral health services in Ohio. Ohio already faces a significant unmet need for behavioral health services. According to the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, as of 2019, the overall unmet demand for these services was estimated to be between 41% and 46%. (DATA.OHIO.GOV) That means nearly half of Ohioans who need behavioral health support are not getting it. This shortage is already a crisis, and SB 1 will only exacerbate this problem. We need to be training more professionals to provide this critically important care. As currently proposed, this legislation could put all higher education training programs at risk.

In conclusion, the Ohio Counseling Association is opposed to SB 1. It is our collective professional belief that this legislation will harm the education of counselors, the treatment of our clients, and important multicultural discussions around our research. As mental health professionals, we urge you not to pass this bill to ensure that all Ohio counselors receive training and education aligned with professionally adopted standards and best practices without unneeded interference.