

Testimony of Adam I. Keller, Ph.D.  
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee  
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair

February 11, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, and Members of the Senate Higher Education Committee:

My name is Adam Keller, and I am a professor of Chemistry at Columbus State Community College, where I have taught for 18 years. I submit this testimony as the president of the Columbus State Education Association, and as a dedicated faculty member, to express opposition to the proposed Ohio Senate Bill 1. This bill includes numerous requirements which we oppose, including restrictions on DEI training, bans on higher ed unions striking, limitations on academic freedom, and the erosion of tenure.

Banning requirements for DEI training places our accreditation and business partnerships in jeopardy. Regional employers in STEM are telling us they need a diverse workforce and the intellectual diversity it provides, with the soft skills needed to operate in a multi-cultural environment, and in a collaborative and respectful manner. It is completely unclear what “DEI” means with respect to this proposed bill. Is it merely referring to hiring practices aimed to intentionally hire people based on their race, gender or ethnicity? We are not doing that, because that constitutes an illegal practice under current law(s). Our “DEI” work recognizes the human and cultural diversity and provides students and current employees with growth opportunities and lifelong skills to live and work in a multicultural world. With respect to accreditation, the Higher Learning Commission requires us to have processes and activities that demonstrate inclusive and equitable treatment of diverse populations.

Although the substitute bill provides exceptions for DEI training for accreditation and grants, this only applies to grants awarded prior to the effective date of this legislation (lines 657-662). Currently, federal funding is in a state of limbo, threatening to eliminate 70 grant-funded employees at our college who steer our work to provide a skilled workforce to Ohio employers. Couple this with SB1, which would further prohibit securing any future grant to ensure students receive training around working in a multi-cultural workplace, and will prevent Columbus State and other community colleges from targeting strategies to help all types of Ohioans (including veterans and economically-disadvantaged students from rural areas) access these opportunities and meet employers’ requirements for a diverse workforce. Please remember, community colleges are open enrollment, and cannot “selectively” admit students based on gender, race or ethnicity. The million-dollar question then becomes: If we rebrand these trainings as “Don’t be a Jerk at School or at Work” does that mean we are still doing DEI work and just calling it something else (which is also prohibited in this bill)?

The elimination of DEI training, and faculty annual evaluations are in conflict with one another in this bill by creating a catch-22 situation: either comply with the law, or be subject to discipline if the college engages in training that fosters inclusivity in the classroom and the workplace. This also

adds another layer of confusion where faculty evaluations are concerned, in that they would require student evaluations of faculty, specifically whether or not their classroom is “free of... bias” as stated in lines 907-908 of the bill. How can the state propose to eliminate DEI training, yet evaluate faculty on their ability to foster a bias-free classroom? Research has shown, without debate, that individuals who do not believe they have anything to learn about bias are the same individuals who are most likely to discriminate with respect to religion, race, etc. (Correll 2017, MacKenzie et al 2020). If a faculty member engages in biased teaching, training to correct that would be banned.

Student evaluations as part of employee appraisals gives substantial power to those with the least experience in effective evaluation of teaching quality. There are additional concerns with regard to the conservative faculty that this bill aims to protect. Seventy-five percent of the current generation of college students, Gen Zers, are voting democratic. They are much less likely to favorably evaluate a conservative professor hostile to diversity, equity and inclusion. DEI is something that our younger generation feels strongly about. If the goal is intellectual diversity in terms of faculty, student evaluations are likely to undermine that effort. It is also baffling how “standardized, objective and measurable performance metrics” (lines 935-936) translates to Higher Ed. This may work if faculty were selling a product and had sales or output quotas, but one-size-fits-all evaluations do not work when faculty are doing a wide range of work on our campus. One faculty member is teaching upper-level chemistry to articulate towards a Bachelor’s degree, while another is serving as a Program Coordinator for Respiratory Therapy. There is no standardized metric that would fairly evaluate the work all the faculty do for our institution. With the threat of retrenchment constantly hanging over the heads of faculty, what incentives will there be to be truly innovative in the classroom, or in research, or in service? And how will Ohio attract top talent without the guarantees of tenure? We already have trouble recruiting highly talented faculty given our limited salaries. Just ask anyone at CSCC how it is becoming nearly impossible to attract qualified talent, and perhaps ask them about the responses they often get when a qualified recruit learns of the starting salary.

As President of the Columbus State Education Association, it is especially alarming that this bill would make it illegal for college employees to strike and add restrictions to collective bargaining. It is critically important for faculty and administration to work together to address issues and solve problems, and provide the best possible learning environment for students. This is not attainable without both parties at the table. The ability for a faculty union to strike is paramount for faculty to protect academic freedom, prevent censorship, ensure due process, improve working conditions, and protect quality education. Most of all competitive wages, benefits, and good working conditions are necessary to attract high quality educators and ensure the best education for students. Perhaps more importantly, a faculty strike is the most efficient diuretic when an institution suffers from mismanagement and/or a toxic work culture. Do the sponsors of this bill prefer prolonged, passive-aggressive labor disputes, which are much more disruptive to the student learning environment? Do the authors of this bill prefer if faculty no longer engage in “voluntary” service to the college, such as administrative functions and program support? At Columbus State, faculty and administration collaborate on a daily basis, partnering to serve our students and the community. By toppling our collective bargaining rights, you invite a skewed dynamic that would eliminate our mutual agreement and understanding in how to adjust the workforce to address emergent needs. All the work we do to minimize the risk to the institution and

the workforce could be rendered moot on any given day, when the board decides they want to change how those risks are mitigated. Isn't it healthier, more efficient, and mutually respectful if the faculty and institutional leadership have a transparent agreement, and come together when it needs to be modified? Given how the funding for Higher Ed continues to wane as the costs of doing business continues to increase, the erosion of collective bargaining will further disenchant faculty from serving in the public sector, and drive them into more profitable endeavors. In case you didn't know, highly qualified faculty do not do this work for the paycheck. Be respectful of their service. This is Ohio, not a proving ground for national-level political interest. Please do not add Ohio to the list of states that have "defeated" collective bargaining so we may join the ranks of states like Utah, where Higher Ed is not a major economic driver for their state.

In the end, we are public servants. We do the work because we believe in the work we do, particularly at a community college. We meet our students where they are, which means we work hard and continuously learn about where they come from, and what challenges they need to overcome to become part of the Ohio workforce. We continuously do more and more every day, every semester, to provide our students with a career path, and the resources and knowledge and skills required to be successful, yet we are doing it with less and less funding and support from our state. The requirements and restrictions put forth in this bill will take dollars away from our mission, and add time to degree completion for in-demand careers, such as nursing and healthcare. Requiring the BSN program to add an American History course will mean students will be required to take an additional semester to graduate. There is no room in our programs for the state to inflate the number of credit hours required for graduation. Our administration and faculty have a joint commitment to make sure our community has fire fighters, police officers, teachers, health care workers, manufacturing professionals, and this bill does nothing to help with that.

But this bill does aim to add millions of dollars of bureaucracy, administrative bloat, and to do so at our own expense in an already severely underfunded enterprise. We had already been experiencing enrollment declines, and just this year showing improvements and a return to pre-pandemic levels, and yet this bill isn't going to help in recruiting, retaining, and preparing students. Companies and businesses in Ohio know that a diverse workforce, armed with the soft skills to operate in a multicultural environment is profitable. How long will they trust in a state like Ohio to provide a profitable landscape if the state legislature overreaches into higher ed by imposing bans, restrictions, and requirements that are blind to the needs of state institutions and the businesses/workforce they serve?

In conclusion, the Columbus State Education Association urges you to consider the detrimental impact that Senate Bill 1 would have on our students, our faculty, and our institutions as a whole. We need legislation addressing the cost of college, student debt, declining full time faculty ratios, and support for student retention. We need the state to support a collaborative environment among students, faculty and administrators. Instead, we have this bill which is the worst attack on organized labor since SB5 in 2011 (which, I may remind you, was repealed by an overwhelming majority of Ohio voters). We urge you to support higher education, and not commandeer it in the name of partisan politics.

Sincerely and respectfully,

Adam I. Keller, Ph.D.

President - Columbus State Education Association

Works cited:

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