

Michael Keller
10 February 2025

Subject: Strong Opposition to Senate Bill 1—Protect Faculty and Student Rights to Free Speech

Dear Committee:

I am writing as a concerned faculty member to voice my opposition to Senate Bill 1, which I see as a deeply misguided attempt to reshape higher education in a way that undermines faculty and silences college students. I urge anyone who cares about the future of higher education to vote against this bill.

As an educator who has been teaching for over 16 years, I see a shocking number of ways in which this bill threatens my ability to teach my students—and for my students to succeed. First, the dismantling of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives will undo many successful programs that have helped our students succeed. I have always been impressed by my institution's ability to reach out to students of all backgrounds—from the rural Ohioan to the newly arrived immigrant—and this bill will harm all of our students by curtailing our ability to help these students in impactful ways.

On a practical level, undermining faculty collective bargaining rights (as this bill does) undercuts our ability to maintain our salaries, benefits, and workplace rights—all of which are essential for attracting and retaining talented educators. Furthermore, the foundational contradiction in this bill—claiming to want more academic inquiry while strictly prescribing what we cannot talk about in the classroom—shows that this bill is hopelessly illogical. Of course, I am worried about my own rights to free speech in the classroom, and I cannot help but think of this bill as a clear attack on all faculty and, even more importantly, students. Let me give two examples of this.

First, there is a moment early in SB1, where Ohio voters are told that student members of the Ohio State University Board of Trustees will have no voting power, will not count toward quorum, and will not be entitled to attend executive sessions. This is in no way the worst part of the bill, but it is symptomatic of SB1's overall effect: to silence students. That is to say, while the bill's sponsor claims that "S.B.1 is about more speech, not less," the author of the bill does not seem to think that speech should come from our students.

Secondly, the bill requires that faculty be evaluated on whether they create "a classroom atmosphere free of bias." This is not saying that faculty must be free of bias—although even that would deny anyone a right to subjectivity. No, this is saying that the "atmosphere" must be free of bias, which is to say that students must also participate in censoring themselves, lest their professors be held accountable for it. Right now, students are encouraged to share their voices, to engage in rigorous and thoughtful inquiry and debate, which often means discussing and disagreeing about topics that are difficult—a process that is essential for their intellectual growth. This bill would require faculty to muzzle their students, teach in fear of offending the wrong student, and work in an environment where their opinions are being closely monitored. All of these things are the hallmark of a closed, authoritarian society—not a society with free and open inquiry. Moreover, this is not how students learn.

As an educator, I am well equipped to train my students to think critically about the world around them, whichever ideological lens they may use. This bill seems intent on restricting my students only to one ideology—that of the government, which seeks to control the very thoughts of young scholars who deserve so much more. My students are wonderful, thoughtful, and capable of such great things. This bill requires me to water down what I teach them, to coddle their minds so they can never grow. Our students deserve better. If you care at all about my students, please vote against this bill.

Sincerely,

Michael Keller, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English