

Testimony of Benjamin L McKean, PhD
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 11, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Benjamin McKean, and I am an associate professor of political science at the Ohio State University, where I have taught since 2013. I do not represent the Ohio State University but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I love teaching at Ohio State. I teach political theory, which is the part of political science that asks questions like, what is freedom? What is democracy? What are the responsibilities of citizens? It's a pleasure and a privilege to talk with our students about these important ideas. In fact, it's thrilling to introduce students to the tradition of political theory and to the practice of thinking carefully and clearly about political ideas. I love seeing them realize that reading Aristotle can still help them understand our world. I love seeing them read thinkers with a wide range of political views, from Audre Lorde to Friedrich Hayek, and having them find there new arguments that they want to support or criticize. I take Ohio State's motto "education for citizenship" seriously and I believe everyone in Ohio should have the opportunity to learn from and engage with these ideas.

I believe Senate Bill 1 is a serious threat to these educational experiences. There is so much in the bill that I could discuss, but I want highlight three serious problems with it that lead me to ask you to oppose this bill.

First, my classroom benefits immensely from the diversity of Ohio State University students. People with different backgrounds and life experiences bring different perspectives into the classroom and we all benefit from hearing from and talking with each other. In my classroom, a student who grew up on a farm in rural Ohio sits alongside the child of refugees only recently arrived in the city. These students have had very different experiences of politics and accordingly often have different perspectives on politics. Sharing this diversity of experiences enriches all of us. But the bill's prohibition on so-called DEI activities threatens this because people with different kinds of experiences need different kinds of support to get through college.

That's all "DEI" is – a name for efforts to make sure everybody feels welcome and supported. Prohibiting those efforts will predictably make it harder for some people to get to and stay in college. I was chair of my department's DEI committee for a couple years. From the way DEI is talked about these days, you'd think I was in charge of yelling at white people or something. But you know what our DEI committee did? It organized a happy hour to welcome new faculty. It ran a survey to make sure our students were receiving effective mentorship. It organized an end-of-the-year potluck to celebrate people's accomplishments during the school year. These kinds of efforts make sure everyone feels included and treated fairly. And

now this bill is saying that this kind of work to make sure people feel included will be illegal? It makes no sense. It's one of many ways that the bill is shaped by false perceptions of higher education that has nothing to do with reality. Prohibiting DEI on campus is going to reduce intellectual diversity because it is going to reduce the diversity of experiences that students bring to my classroom.

Second, the bill's regulations on how I can teach controversial beliefs betrays either a fundamental misunderstanding of how education works or a deep hostility to it. There's a sense in which being required to "allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies and...not seek to indoctrinate any social, political, or religious point of view" is totally banal. I don't try to "indoctrinate" my students into any point of view and I don't know any professor in Ohio who does. But what I do try to do is help them learn and part of learning is helping them to see how some claims are false and some arguments are invalid. If SB 1 is the government is trying to tell me that I can't tell a student in my classroom when they get something wrong, then you are effectively making it illegal for me to teach. That sounds so ridiculous that I can hardly believe it is your intent. And yet if press coverage of SB 1 is to be believed, Sen. Cirino has said that, under SB 1, students who doubt gravity should be allowed to derail a physics class and force the instructor to depart from their lesson plan to address their specious questions. The bill seems to be based on a view that's almost a parody of postmodern relativism, that all views are equally valid. If that's true, then professors don't know any more than students do and the whole enterprise of education is a sham. Well, I don't think education is a sham. I've spent years reading Aristotle and Kant and Hayek and I think I've learned from that – something I'm excited to share with my students. But this bill is so badly written, it threatens my ability to do that. Maybe you think I've misinterpreted the bill but remember, the current members of the legislature will not always be the ones interpreting and enforcing this language. As the bill is written, its vagueness and imprecision gives the government the power to coercively prohibit speech – exactly the opposite of its purported intent.

Third and finally, it is often said that a teacher's working conditions are a student's learning conditions. In the ways that this bill attacks faculty's rights as workers, it also imperils student's learning conditions. Faculty will not become better teachers because their rights as workers are violated.

As I said, I am proud to teach at Ohio State and it is because I take seriously our motto of "education for citizenship" that I ask you to oppose this bill.