

Testimony of Elizabeth Rockwell, B.A.  
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee  
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair  
February 10, 2025

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

My name is Elizabeth Rockwell, and I am a doctoral student of musicology at Ohio State University, where I have studied and taught as a graduate associate for nearly three years. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I feel compelled to offer my testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 1, as this legislation would fundamentally decrease the quality of education students receive in the state of Ohio and be a disservice to all those who remain in or relocate to this state to seek out higher education.

In August 2022, I moved to Columbus, Ohio, thrilled to begin graduate school after being the first person in my family to earn a college degree. I recognized my ability to receive higher education as the privilege that it is and I was eager to continue diving into the historiography of my discipline, knowing that someday I too would enter scholarly conversations surrounding music and its place in the world.

At Ohio State, I have taken classes across a variety of departments and been able to expand my worldview broader than I ever believed possible. Never, in any courses, meetings, or other campus functions, have I ever felt that I was undergoing “indoctrination” or that intellectual diversity was absent in these spaces. In fact, it was the opposite: I was (and am) constantly surrounded by people of different backgrounds and experiences, and in every instance, these varied backgrounds were encouraged to speak up and share their views as long as they were respectful of others.

As a student, I have never been told *what* to think, but rather *how* to think critically, using information presented to me from a range of sources. In a world where we must sift through mounds of information each and every day, this skill is invaluable to being a contributing member of our society. Without critical thinking capabilities, our students are at risk of being unable to discern facts from lies; objective truths from misinformation. The same is true in my role as a teaching associate. I ask my students to apply a critical lens to the information they are given, and to consider a topic from multiple perspectives. Viewpoints are never thrust upon them, nor are students discouraged from sharing alternative stances to the content.

Senate Bill 1 is an attack on academic freedom and institutional autonomy, despite operating under the guise of protecting these very ideals. In disciplines like musicology, this bill would have a particularly negative effect. The field of musicology is deeply rooted in the exploration of diverse cultural, historical, and theoretical contexts of music. The study of music often includes critical discussions of social movements, historical oppression, and cross-cultural interactions that are essential to understanding the evolution of music in society. By restricting the ways in which such topics can be explored, this bill directly stifles intellectual inquiry and limits students' ability to engage with complex, multifaceted issues.

My research interests lie in the intersection of social constructions (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) and musical practices. These social constructions play an undeniable role in the creation, performance, and preservation of musical cultures around the world, and not acknowledging such constructions provide an incomplete representation of music's history, role, and impact in the world. Though my research contains what Senate Bill 1 calls "controversial topics" and deals with considerations of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the work that I do does not disenfranchise anyone else, nor does it set out to "indoctrinate" those who encounter it to believe any one position over another. Despite this, I would be at risk of being sanctioned for completing my research under the parameters of Senate Bill 1.

The bill places Ohio at a disadvantage in the broader higher education landscape. Students across the nation and the world seek academic environments that promote open inquiry and intellectual freedom. Ohio's higher education system should not take steps that might make it less attractive to prospective students, particularly those interested in fields that rely on critical analysis, historical context, and cultural understanding. Musicology, in particular, depends on a robust exploration of diverse cultural and historical traditions—subjects that are inherently political and often controversial. Limiting these areas of inquiry harms both the academic quality of Ohio's institutions and the career prospects of its graduates. Myself and others have already had discussions about our long-term trajectories in light of this bill. Before, I saw a future where I could remain in Ohio after graduation and build a life in this new state I have come to love. Now, I have to consider whether or not I can continue the work I have set out to do under the harsh and misguided parameters set by this bill.

Because of the obvious threats to the quality of education in the state of Ohio, I ask that you consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill. Thank you for this opportunity to exercise my civic right to testify.

Elizabeth Rockwell