

Testimony of Chandra Frank, Ph.D
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 9, 2025

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

My name is Chandra Frank, and I am an Assistant Professor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Cincinnati. I do not represent the University of Cincinnati but rather am submitting testimony as a private resident in opposition to Senate Bill 1 (SB1) and its companion House Bill 6 (HB6).

The "Advance Ohio Higher Education Act", known as SB1, is a destructive bill and an egregious attack on academic freedom in Ohio. SB1 proposes state interference in areas such as "university governance" and "instruction", "workload", "tenure and job security", and "retrenchment". I am deeply concerned about the integrity of higher education in Ohio. Public universities play a pivotal role in our educational landscape. Across Ohio, public universities and colleges create opportunities for innovative research and scholarship, experienced-based learning, artistic and creative pursuits, and valuable community collaborations. Public universities offer a temporary intellectual home to a broad range of students, researchers, and community members. Attacks against academic freedom impact faculty and students, and our society as a whole.

I strongly oppose how public universities and their governance are instrumentalized and used as a pawn in the political agenda of a few elected officials. Why is the state controlling our curricula, shared governance, and dictating what should be understood as "controversial beliefs and policies"? The state's attempt to censor concepts and terms within public university settings is suppression of knowledge and undermines the quality of education that our students will receive. Preparing our students to engage in the world at large requires the freedom of intellectual inquiry and the creation of learning environments free from retaliation.

It is important to encourage students to develop a range of intellectually curious perspectives in the classroom. However, SB1 mandates what "intellectual diversity" should look like. Proponents of the bill dictating what and how students learn is antithetical to the purpose of higher education, and a form of indoctrination in itself. Why are the sponsors of the bill using the state to control what forms of knowledge are permissible? And why is the legislature presumed knowledgeable about what can and cannot be taught in the classroom? SB1 seems to be motivated by deep-seated fear of what is deemed "controversial", and as such introduces punitive models of learning. By allowing and encouraging students to "reach their own conclusion about all controversial beliefs or policies", such as climate policies, electoral politics, DEI programs, immigration, marriage, or abortion, we are forced to follow the legislature in what is deemed "controversial". The ramifications of this kind of overreach and overseeing are disastrous. Students will not be able to form critical and independent judgments, and higher education will no longer be a common good.

Universities in Ohio will not meet the standard of academic excellence with the passing of SB1. We will not be able to retain faculty, attract new faculty, or competitive graduate students for that matter. The micromanaging or rather surveillance of our classrooms challenges the expertise of world-class and highly qualified faculty. One can only ask: to what end? Our syllabi are shaped with an astute understanding of what kind of materials students need to engage to understand, analyze, and critically discuss various socio-political viewpoints. State interference in classrooms and enforcing searchable syllabi online, which include the instructor's qualifications, contact information, and course schedules, will inevitably lead to the harassment of faculty, not to mention it infringes upon our intellectual property rights. Claiming that public syllabi would create "transparency" while dictating what faculty can and cannot teach in the classroom is contradictory, to say the least. Teaching any feminist history class requires discussing marriage, abortion, racism, gender discrimination, and electoral politics. Government-led surveillance culture within public universities stifles any meaningful debate and takes away any meaningful evaluation of our classroom environments.

As an Assistant Professor in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) Department, one of the oldest programs in the United States, I am committed to continuing the legacy of feminist organizing and movement building that established our field as an academic discipline. These histories continue to shape our present and future, and cannot be erased – they live on. We serve exceptional students in our own degree programs, as well as a broad range of students who come to us from other departments and disciplines. Students in our classes critically engage the intersections between gender, race, class, and sexuality, and learn how to analyze systems of power in private and public realms. Covering a broad range of topics and histories, from Black feminisms, to work and labor, to motherhood, politics, war, harassment, queer politics, surrogacy, and violence, WGSS is crucial to the Arts & Sciences.

A report by the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA)¹ shows that even though gender studies programs are increasingly under legislative attack, the number of students taking gender studies courses is growing. DEI legislation, as well as "the overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*, Alabama HB314 which bans abortion, or Ohio HB68 which limits access to care for transgender individuals" increased interest in WGSS departments. Rather than being dictated how to learn about the world, our students are seeking complex answers to understand and analyze why academic freedom, reproductive rights, and healthcare are under continued attack.

SB1 does nothing to advance higher education in Ohio. Banning striking and limiting collective bargaining shows that the sponsors of this bill do not value the significant role faculty play in ensuring and maintaining high-quality colleges and universities.

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Higher Education Committee, I urge you to listen to the people of Ohio, who have vehemently opposed this bill since it was introduced as SB83 and vote no against SB1.

¹ Clark-Taylor et al. "Protecting Our Futures: Challenges & Strategies for Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies" (2024). *Mather Center Research Briefs*. 5.