

Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Olivia Riggs, and I am a first-year student at the University of Cincinnati College of Law. I am speaking in opposition to Senate Bill 1 because it restricts academic freedom and threatens the quality of my education.

An article written by the Association of American Colleges reported that colleges with strong DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives tend to have higher retention rates among students. Another study by the National Center for Education found that first-generation students were more likely to stay in college and have higher GPAs. This shows that DEI initiatives play a positive role in higher education.

This bill will fundamentally restrict and virtual destroy my dream of getting a Ph. D in African American history, making me have to seek higher education elsewhere. It will also defund the LGBTQ Center, the AACRC (African American Cultural Resource Center), EPS (Ethnic Programs & Services), and the Women's Center at the University of Cincinnati. All centers and programs have not only been an integral part of my collegiate and legal career but have also helped so many students of multiple races, ethnicities, and sexualities.

If Ohio were to pass the bill, they would be taking themselves off the competitive market with schools and universities who are actively trying to keep DEI initiatives, would lose qualified professors who would be afraid to work in Ohio universities, see a decline in scholarships opportunities and programs that highlight diversity and will start to see a decrease in Ohio children and students going to Ohio universities. But I often wonder if that is the goal. Is that the goal to only have white, Christian, and rich people and students be able to go to college and have their voices heard? This bill sounds like an attempt to keep white people from feeling uncomfortable about the systems they have created.

I believe this bill was created to not only silence the groups of people who have been dispassionately barred from being in higher education but to fuel the national agenda of Project 2025. If the Ohio Senate and House really cared about education, they would be fighting back the federal government and focusing on more issues like sex trafficking, homelessness, and food insecurity.

I came to college excited to engage with new ideas, challenge my perspectives, and become a more well-rounded person. However, this bill imposes unnecessary regulations that will stifle free thought in the classroom. By discouraging discussions about so-called "controversial" topics, this bill tells professors that they must censor their lessons out of fear of political retaliation. How am I supposed to become an informed and engaged citizen if my education is being policed by politicians rather than experts in their fields? College should be a place of discovery, where students learn to think critically, not just memorize approved information. I urge you to reject this bill and protect the integrity of higher education in Ohio.