

Testimony of Rebecca L. Thacker
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 Rebecca Thacker. I am a professor of rhetoric and composition at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for almost three years (2022-present). From 2017-2022, I was a doctoral student/candidate and graduate instructor in English at the University of Cincinnati. Before returning to graduate school, I was a lead teacher and a licensed Ohio Resident Educator for the Cincinnati Public School District. I am a life-long resident of the State of Ohio; a graduate of the Cincinnati Public Schools; and a first-generation college student who has earned four degrees and several graduate certificates—all from Ohio universities. I do not represent The Ohio State University, or any other institution, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen.

I write to you today to publicly voice my vehement opposition to Senate Bill 1. You already know from the unsuccessful two-year bid to get SB 83 out of committee, SB 1 is immensely unpopular with Ohio's citizenry. So, rather than speaking to the myriad organizations, faculty, students, and individual citizens who continue to stand up against SB83/SB1, I'll speak rhetorically to the blatant contradictions that abound in the bill itself:

The first glaring contradiction is that additional legislative oversight of Ohio's higher education institutions is necessary at all. SB 1 is a solution in search of a problem. Ohio State, for example, is ranked 41st out of 436 national universities by U.S. News & World Report. Five Ohio institutions hold the R-1 recognition for their very high research activity, the gold standard in higher education. Our accredited institutions undergo regular, rigorous review by The Higher Learning Commission. All professors on our campuses, tenured or otherwise, already undergo annual review by pedagogical experts. Thus, the Bill unnecessarily duplicates already existing oversights. Additionally, SB 1's sponsors, grossly misrepresent the teaching and learning happening on our college campuses. Students aren't being "indoctrinated"; it's the exact opposite. One of the foundational principles of scholarly activity is "scholarship as conversation," defined in the Association of College and Research Libraries report *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* as "the idea of sustained discourse within a community of scholars, researchers, or professionals, with new insights and discoveries occurring over time as a result of competing perspectives and interpretations." Responsible scholarship requires each of us to explore the full range of perspectives on an issue of importance before adding our own voice to the conversation. Scholarship is defending claims with source-based evidence and reasoning. As scholar-educators, it is our responsibility to impart these principles to our students, who are our scholars-in-training. It's a responsibility we take seriously.

SB 1 would require institutions to "affirm and declare that the institution will ensure full intellectual diversity," *and yet* the bill calls for the end of all programs providing the tailored support students need to enroll, succeed, and graduate from our state's colleges and universities. SB 1 "prohibits any diversity,

equity, and inclusion (DEI). This includes orientations, training, offices or departments, contracts with third parties to promote DEI, scholarships, or replacing any of the aforementioned with other things that serve similar purposes.” So, for example, at Ohio State, I serve as a faculty mentor for first generation students through The Office of Undergraduate Recruitment’s Buckeye Opportunities for Leadership & Development (BOLD) program, which is “intended to provide a network of support and leadership development for first-generation students in the College of Arts and Sciences.” If SB 1 passes, programs that exist to meet the unique needs of first-gen students, like BOLD, become illegal. The bill would ban institutions from providing the types of training and programs that ensure all students, no matter their backgrounds, can succeed. SB 1’s authors claim the bill is intended to create intellectual diversity on campus but, paradoxically, by eliminating these vital programs, the bill will result in less intellectual, cultural, and economic diversity on our campuses.

SB 1’s sponsors argue that the bill aligns with Ohio State’s motto *Disciplina in Civitatem*, “Education for Citizenship” But the truth is, the bill does the opposite. SB 1 includes glaring contradictions on freedom of speech— it claims to promote intellectual diversity while simultaneously dictating the way so-called “controversial” topics can be discussed. SB 1 defines “controversial beliefs” as “any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.” At OSU, we strive to empower our students to take ownership of their learning and actively participate in the classroom, on campus, in government, and in the community. Ohio’s universities should prepare students to participate earnestly and knowledgeably in our democracy, but this bill’s virtual elimination of tenure, establishment of surveillance systems, and redefinition of retrenchment to allow for the termination of classes and programs without valid cause is meant to have a chilling effect on the democratic exchange of ideas. By dictating which topics can and can’t be discussed, limiting which points of view on issues of social concern that our students can or can’t be exposed to, SB 1 ironically does the very thing it purports professors on campus are doing, indoctrinating students to one world view. SB 1 does *not* represent education for citizenship in democracy. It *does*, however, represent education for obedience to the sponsors’ political agenda.

SB 1 originates in the “Workforce” and Higher Education Committee, but if this bill passes, it is certain to have drastic, irreparable consequences for our state’s workforce and economy. As part of a national and global market, Ohio’s employers need workers who are critical thinkers, flexible, and able to communicate and collaborate with a diverse array of co-workers from all backgrounds. But, as I noted above, SB 1’s anti-DEI provisions will reduce diversity on campus. Additionally, its unfunded mandates are sure to increase tuition, as our colleges and universities necessarily must raise the capital required to administer the syllabus surveillance system and additional, unnecessarily repetitive, faculty oversight systems. Higher tuition means fewer out-of-state and international enrollments. And many Ohioans who oppose this anti-democratic legislative overreach will send their children out of state for college—my four siblings and I have earned a collective eleven degrees from Ohio colleges, but as a family we’ll pool our resources to send each of my nieces and nephews out of state if this bill becomes law. The educated, highly skilled workers Ohio needs to compete in the twenty-first century marketplace won’t come to Ohio; instead, they’ll go to states that respect academic freedom and the systems of shared governance that are the pillars of democratic society.

SB 1 is titled “*Advance Ohio Higher Education Act*,” but it goes against the direct guidance of the nonpartisan Center for American Progress. In their Nov 4, 2024 report, “A Progressive Vision for

Education in the 21st Century,” CAP calls for states and institutions of higher education to “implement comprehensive measures that support academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and free inquiry while fostering safe learning environments in order to protect the right of students to learn the truth. Protecting academic freedom requires policies that shield it from political, special, and commercial interests and includes supporting tenure and faculty governance structures that enable faculty to teach, research, and express ideas without outside interference.” SB 1 is exactly the interference by political interests that CAP warns against. The bill represents an unprecedented level of legislative overreach and micromanagement.

I have dedicated my life to scholarship and civic education. As a trained rhetorician with thirteen years of postsecondary education and thirty years’ experience teaching young citizens to critically evaluate and build source-based arguments on issues of social concern, I posit that SB 1 is a masterclass in Orwellian double-speak. In fact, we could rewrite the slogan from Orwell’s *1984* to reveal the true agenda behind SB1’s disguised message: “War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.” becomes “Intellectual diversity is eliminating diversity.” “Freedom of speech is legislative oversight on controversial issues.” and “Education for citizenship is education for obedience.” SB 1 is wrong for Ohio’s students, wrong for Ohio’s democracy, and wrong for Ohio’s economy. I call on you to vote NO on this needless, dangerous bill.

Respectfully,

Rebecca Thacker

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