

Testimony of Genevieve Ritchie-Ewing, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 7, 2025

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

My name is Genevieve Ritchie-Ewing, and I am a professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Central State University, where I have taught for 6 years. I do not represent Central State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

While terms such as controversial beliefs or policies and intellectual diversity are defined in the current bill, there are several issues with this bill that impinge on academic freedom, faculty job protection, and union rights. These impingements will weaken the ability of Ohio state institutions to hire quality faculty for their programs and prevent faculty from encouraging intellectual diversity among their students. First, preventing faculty employees from bargaining over retrenchment, evaluations, and tenure will create an environment in which faculty jobs are dependent on the whims of trustees, administrators, and even students. All institutions where I have worked in the past and my current institution already have procedures for post-tenure review and annual faculty evaluations. Having these processes approved by someone outside the institution (the chancellor) will create issues as all institutions do not emphasize teaching, research, and service in the same way. The development and oversight of these processes, therefore, are better left where they already are – within the each institution. Additionally, while the bill states that the cause prompting post-tenure review cannot be a faculty member's allowable expression of academic freedom, the academic freedom of faculty is already severely limited by other parts of the bill as I discuss in my third paragraph. Last, as universities become more focused on finances, faculty need to be able to apply pressure for conditions that benefit students both instructionally and personally such as smaller classroom sizes, advising and mentoring requirements, and appropriate teaching assignments. Eliminating the job protection for faculty and their ability to strike precludes them from fighting for these provisions.

Second, the requirement to make course syllabi publicly available generates unnecessary administrative costs for universities, many of which are already facing financial hardship. This requirement also opens up the possibility that faculty will be harassed by people who do not attend the university because they don't agree with the topics covered in a course. Faculty may be intimidated by these individuals, which, in turn, produces another situation that reduces intellectual diversity rather than safeguarding it. If faculty feel that they cannot present multiple viewpoints because of the perspectives of administrators, politicians, and the public, then intellectual diversity isn't possible in the true sense of the phrase. Intimidation never promotes intellectual diversity and this bill sets faculty up for intimidation on multiple fronts. As such, this requirement conflicts with the requirement to create a statement of commitment that emphasizes free inquiry and equality of opportunity.

Third, intellectual diversity means having multiple viewpoints to consider as mentioned in the bill. Discussion of controversial beliefs and policies should be encouraged in college classrooms, but according to this bill, I may be disciplined for talking about gender expression or not talking about gender expression depending on how a specific student in my class feels. Having a specific, weighted parameter for student evaluations produces situations in which faculty must cater to students rather than expecting students to strive for excellence. With this bill, I cannot ask students to consider alternative viewpoints if I am concerned about how a specific student might react and the effect that could have on my job. I encourage my students to express their thoughts and opinions in my classroom, but part of my job is challenging their perspectives. As such, I present many different viewpoints that may or may not reflect my own. Having your perspectives challenged can be (and should be) uncomfortable, but it also fosters critical thinking skills that are vital for modern careers. I don't require students to agree with any specific viewpoint, but I always ask them to carefully and respectfully consider how others think, a fundamental aspect of higher education. While I do allow students to reach their own conclusions, not every student in my class may perceive my challenges to their beliefs as an attempt to allow them to reach their own conclusions after considering other options. Since the language in the bill regarding students reaching their own conclusions is broad and unclear, I, then, again am faced with the possibility that I will lose my job if I ask students to broaden their perspectives.

Lastly, this bill claims to emphasize intellectual diversity yet wants to prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion training. All people tend to focus on their own experiences when examining situations in their lives and the lives of others. The purpose of diversity, equity, and inclusion training is to expose people to the same broadening perspectives that I argue students need. Understanding others' cultures and situations helps us collectively make better solutions that benefit the most people. If we ignore that diversity in race, ethnicity, religion, ability, etc. exists, then we are limiting conversations and producing the same ideas over and over again rather than exploring the rich intellectual diversity that exists in the world. Either you want to ensure intellectual diversity or you don't. In addition, this bill requires a statement of commitment that includes specific language about free and open intellectual inquiry, independence of thought, tolerance of differing viewpoints, and equality of opportunity. Again, these factors strongly conflict with other parts of the bill including the ban on DEI training. As a professor in the only public Historically Black College/University in Ohio, my students frequently mention the lack of understanding of their experiences in broader U.S. society. DEI training only introduces the perspectives and experiences of others like my students to encourage understanding on both sides and across the board.