

Testimony of Charles Athanasopoulos, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 10th, 2025

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

My name is Charles Athanasopoulos, and I am an Assistant professor of Black Studies & English at The Ohio State University where I have taught since August after relocating from another institution. I have been teaching college courses for six years across the United States. I do not represent The Ohio State University; instead, my submitted testimony represents my perspective as a private citizen of the State of Ohio in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

My testimony here is not simply motivated by the protection of my livelihood but driven by an ethical imperative to resist the conservative backlash which is currently sweeping the United States. With the repeal of affirmative action and current attacks on DEI, there is a renewed push by conservatives to control both who is in college classrooms and what is being taught in those classrooms. I believe the Ohio State legislature, and SB 1 represents a test-case for a broader national conversation surrounding ideological freedom, academic protections, and, at its root, a conversation about the relationship between education and politics.

SB 1, by definition, does not increase freedom of thought as it explicitly seeks to retroactively prohibit conversations already occurring in college classrooms. Any argument to the contrary relies on a faulty assertion that the existence of “leftist” discourses on college campuses is mutually exclusive with the ability for conservative students or faculty to express their perspectives. And yet, the reality is that the supporters of SB 1 seek to limit the expression of leftist ideology while, at the same time, the Ohio legislature has agreed to fund the existence of a right-wing center, the Chase Center, on the Ohio State University campus. Thus, SB 1 establishes DEI as its straw-person, the imaginary boogeyman which hangs over the head of the imagined ‘silenced’ student. And yet, this red herring of reverse-discrimination serves to justify stripping legal protections for students and faculty who profess ideologies not housed within the umbrella of *traditional* (conservative) American civic philosophy.

The text of SB 1 does not simply reject mandatory trainings, it altogether *prohibits* (p.22, lines 614-637) the existence of DEI trainings and programs. Further, the text of SB 1 never provides a clear definition of what constitutes a DEI program, training, office, or department. Yet, the text of the bill also declares that:

“A state institution shall not replace any orientation, training, office, or position designated for the purpose of diversity, equity, and inclusion that is prohibited under this division with an orientation, training, office, or position under a different designation that serves the same or similar purposes, or that uses the same or similar means.” (p. 22-23, lines 638-643).

The vague definition of DEI in SB 1, coupled with this section of the bill, provides no clear threshold for which programs would be defunded. For this reason, it should be assumed that SB 1 clears the way for the politically motivated elimination of Black Studies, of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies in the state of Ohio. The Ohio State

University has one of the oldest Black studies departments in the country, born out of student and faculty protests in the late 1960s here and nation-wide. Black studies posits that the cultures, media, literature, poetry, and political movements of Afro-descendants are worthy of study. Further, it is premised on the idea that such a study may in fact lead us to reconsider prominent discourses within U.S. society and, indeed, transform that society. While preceding the existence of official DEI policies and programs, SB1 empowers conservative politicians to arbitrarily group various programs, departments, etc. in order to facilitate their elimination.

The text of SB 1 further prohibits faculty from taking positions on “controversial issues” which is anathema to the roots of Black studies which is born of cultural and political movements. In particular, the bill explains that

"Controversial belief or policy" means 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. (p. 21, lines 600-604).

How does one teach about Caribbean and African anti-colonial movements, the South African anti-apartheid movement, and the post-Ferguson era of BLM activism without making recourse to political conversations and taking “positions on controversial issues?” Given that Black studies was born of student-led protests, it seems that there is in fact a public mandate stretching back to the 1960s to provide space for these forms of study. This point also explains why the faculty strikes are important. These strikes are not simply a matter of collective bargaining *for* faculty members, though that is important, but, in the context of Black studies, it has served as a tool for *supporting our students* in their efforts to control their own education.

Ultimately, SB 1 is just one piece of a larger conservative backlash sweeping the United States. The text of the bill (1) promotes sweeping prohibitions which seek to control what is allowed in the classroom, and (2) empowers the politically motivated elimination of Black Studies, of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies under the banner of “DEI” elimination, and (3) makes impossible nuanced political conversations about pressing and relevant social issues arbitrarily deemed too “controversial” for the classroom. As we’ve seen in mainstream media portrayals, Vice Chair Cirino and others will try to distract from the textual mandates in SB 1 by scapegoating faculty ideological commitments which conservatives find abhorrent. This is nothing but a smoke screen for a bill which viciously defangs educational protections for programs born out of student demands. The question before you is: *should there exist a space in these classrooms for students and teachers to converse about controversial issues without the fear of retribution by political elites?* The question before you is: *do you want to be responsible for the destruction of historic programs born out of the demands of our students?*