

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is De'Shawna Yamini. I am strongly opposed to SB1 and its companion bill HB 6. I worked for Sinclair College for over thirteen years and earned a degree and two certificates. For five of the thirteen years, I was honored to coordinate a support and intervention program for Black men. The college needed help retaining students in this demographic. It wasn't that they couldn't do the work; the students did not feel supported on campus. Two administrators presented the college board of trustees with implementing a student success program for Black men. The board agreed and approved. My job was to create and provide holistic support and intervention, which included connections to campus resources, tutoring, job preparation, and personal and professional development. Over 90 percent were first-generation college students who had no college mentors. Over the last eight years, Black men's graduation rates increased dramatically. In the program I coordinated, the students became a support system who cared for each other like family. Even years after graduation, they are all still very close. Many transferred from community college to four-year institutions and earned bachelor's degrees, never earning less than a 3.0 GPA each semester. In 2023, I traveled to Penn State University to see one of my young men graduate with his master's degree in International Affairs. What a success story! This young man went from community college to Penn State! I am so proud.

There are more success stories like these. My program boasts dental hygienists, social workers, entrepreneurs, engineers, videographers, fitness instructors, and restaurant owners - the list goes on and on. I know they benefitted from having a program dedicated to their success when so many are ready to write them off. This program and many like it save and change lives. A couple of young men in my program were returning citizens, formerly incarcerated, but now they are college graduates. One of them started a cleaning business. This budding entrepreneur met another young man who had the same story. You put them on paper, and they were the same person. The difference was that one of them was a young White man. The young Black man invited him to join the program, saying, "If we keep him from benefiting from our office, we are no better than people who do the same thing to us." They welcomed him with open arms.

Efforts such as Senate Bill 1 will kill programs that help young people, no matter what they look like, find their way to happy, successful, and productive lives. One of the turning points in my program was when I invited the students to take some classes in African American studies. We learned together and talked about all the fantastic trailblazers of the past who looked like them - some of them they had never heard of before. I noticed by watching them discuss what they learned that representation matters. When you see someone who looks like you and has a similar story doing something amazing, you believe you can do it, too. Watching students from all backgrounds learn and grow by learning about each other has been incredible. We also learned that people from all ethnic and racial backgrounds worked together to fight for human rights and civil rights for all people. The diversity programming at Sinclair College supports everyone and has something for everyone. It has been a blessing to us all.

I had a student whose family legally immigrated to the U.S. from Cameroon. During a classroom introduction, the student shared that he was from Cameroon. Another student asked him if he lived in a tree. My student was stunned. He responded, "I do not even know how to climb a tree." We had people in the classroom who thought of Africa as rural and didn't understand that the continent has countries that are just as modern as our cities in America.

I was embarrassed for both the student from Cameroon and the student who asked the question. Diversity, equity, and inclusion ensure that individuals are hired based on merit, no matter who they are. There is no such thing as a quota. Affirmative Action existed to give African Americans and women a fair chance at employment. If all things have been fair, then why were specific policies instituted in the first place? As a citizen, I would like our elected officials to understand the needs and concerns of all their constituents, not just some of them. Have you ever asked any organization or institution how their policies have made a difference? Or have you drawn your conclusions without investigation? Please understand why DEI is impactful and not a hindrance.

College enrollment, especially at community colleges, has taken a real hit since we entered the pandemic. I fear that this bill will hurt us more than it will help. Not only will we lose students, but we will also lose talented faculty and staff in droves. Everyone has a choice in what history class they want to take. The biggest complaints might be about an issue with an entree in the cafeteria or getting quieter study spaces. I strongly oppose SB 1 for what it does to education – it harms students and faculty with unnecessary practices and limitations that will interrupt and distract from the learning process, not add value to it. As we watch all the discourse about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, it is painfully evident that elected officials have no idea what it is. While at Sinclair, I served on several hiring committees. When selecting candidates, I looked at the resume materials to see how closely they fit the job description. Once the person interviews for the role, our committee choose the best fit, regardless of gender or racial background. In my last role at Sinclair, I was a hiring manager and needed to fill five positions. I hired two Black women, two White men, and one White woman. Each had a background in higher education, student support, or customer service. I was so grateful for such an excellent team! DEI is more about company and institutional culture, not preferential treatment in hiring. I have never seen it work that way. Since Sinclair is an open-access institution where everyone has a chance to learn, the goal is to ensure that staff, students, and professors check their biases so that we can all enjoy the best the education process offers.

Please consider my testimony and vote NO!

Sincerely,

De'Shawna Yamini