

Testimony of Ryan Skinner, Ph.D.  
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee  
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair  
February 11, 2025

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

My name is Ryan Skinner. I am a Professor of Music and African American and African Studies at The Ohio State University, where I have taught for nearly fifteen years. I do not represent Ohio State but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I would like to address four fallacies at the center of this legislation: 1) that intellectual diversity is either lacking or absent in our institutions; 2) that diversity, equity, and inclusion (or “DEI”) initiatives are harmful to higher education; 3) that increased governmental surveillance of teaching and curriculum is justifiable; and 4) that restrictions on faculty organization and protest are warranted. These are all errors in judgement and reasoning, reflecting partisan bias without basis in fact.

First, there is no shortage of intellectual diversity in Ohio higher education. A visit to a faculty meeting at Ohio State, in any of our many Colleges and academic units would demonstrate this fact. As faculty, we often disagree, discuss, and debate issues pertinent to shared governance, curriculum development, teaching, student recruitment, hiring priorities, and much else. Some of these debates represent significant differences of opinion. This is part of the normal and appropriate conduct of our profession. We work through our differences and make choices that we believe are in the best interests of our faculty, staff, and students.

In this context, this bill’s argument that intellectual diversity is lacking and that certain viewpoints are silenced is simply wrong. This is as true of the faculty lounge as it is the classroom. Every day, university instructors encounter students from all walks of life. We present our topics of study with care and rigor, anchored in years of study and research, with an openness to critical inquiry and creative exploration. We are not teaching them “what” to think, but, rather, “how” to think more cogently and critically—to be better equipped to marshal their own acquired knowledge to more fluently address a topic, issue, or problem.

Second, this bill impugns “DEI” on the grounds that efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion are somehow threatening and harmful to academic institutions and the communities they serve. But there is nothing threatening about social and cultural pluralism. These are, rather, clear and present realities of the society in which we live!

Further, the purported harms attributed to DEI are misguided. Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives do not advantage or disadvantage people. They do not silence dissenting voices or

segregate our communities. Just the opposite. DEI initiatives exist to ensure that everyone (students, faculty, and staff alike) may live, grow, learn, work, and ultimately thrive in our institutions. DEI initiatives emerge from the simple, but vital recognition that we are, in fact, variously different, and that there is value in acknowledging and supporting such difference.

Third, this bill proposes an onerous and altogether inappropriate increase in state surveillance of teaching and learning at the university. The provision to publish syllabi is not only unnecessary, as students (our primary constituency) already have ready access to course documents, it also appears to be expressly antagonistic; that is, designed to harm faculty. The provision would subject faculty members to undue scrutiny from non-specialist observers outside the university. This would more than likely increase public harassment of faculty, inviting intrusive and unsolicited commentary on course content. Moreover, this is a wasteful provision, creating new levels of unnecessary and harmful bureaucracy.

The provisions regarding annual review are also redundant and unnecessary. The workloads of faculty at all levels of employment are already rigorously reviewed and assessed each year. I am a Full Professor, and I just recently submitted annual review documents to the two academic units I serve. New provisions would only cause confusion and add more bureaucracy through redundant measures. This is a waste of university time and resources.

Further, the provision addressing “positions, policies, programs, and activities” is as ambiguous as it is dangerous. There is wide latitude in the prohibition of so-called “controversial” concepts that could make any focused discussion that centers identity—such as the Jewish experience of the Holocaust, Japanese internment during World War II, African Americans’ experiences of Jim Crow segregation, women’s struggle for enfranchisement, or the queer liberation politics of the Stonewall uprising—uncertain, if not impossible. Indeed, how could you meaningfully discuss the “Emancipation Proclamation” or King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (two texts singled out in the “American Civic Literacy” provision) without the concepts of “race” or “racism?”

Finally, fourth, this bill is unabashedly anti-union and therefore anti-worker. This is painfully clear in measures prohibiting collective bargaining subjects (including faculty workload, evaluation, tenure, and retrenchment) and faculty strikes. Why prevent faculty from standing up for their rights as employees? Why inhibit our ability to express legitimate grievance as a workforce? It is quite frankly absurd to see Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted as an icon of American civics in the context; the same man who authored the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” *was assassinated while supporting a sanitation worker strike in Memphis, Tennessee.*

Because of these manifest errors in the argument and reasoning of this bill, I ask that you consider my testimony and vote “No.” Thank you again for this opportunity to testify.

Ryan Skinner, Ph.D.