

Testimony of Thomas S. Davis, PhD, Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 10, 2025

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Thomas S. Davis. I am Associate Professor of English at The Ohio State University. I have taught and mentored the best and brightest students in our state since arriving at OSU in 2008, including Rhodes Scholars and Fulbright Fellows. I have challenged our students in the classroom and taken them further afield to Antarctica and to southern Louisiana to put ideas into practice. For this work, I have received three teaching awards. As an educator and as a citizen of this state, I strongly oppose SB 1. I should note at the outset that this is a revived version of previous efforts by Senator Cirino to capture higher education and all of those efforts have been deeply unpopular with Ohioans.

Like its unpopular predecessors, there is much in this bill that should give every citizen and educator reason for pause. For one, it is a clear assault on academic freedom and the important work we do to teach our students how to think and thrive in a democratic society. Our state legislators assume the authority and knowledge of best educational practices resides with the state, not with educators and researchers who have dedicated their lives to their various fields and the students they teach. This is a classic example of government overreach and interference. But more than that, I would like to draw attention to the way this bill would establish an “intellectual diversity” regime, one that will mandate course content and establish new forms of state surveillance and discipline over faculty and researchers.

One could be forgiven for not fully understanding what the authors of this bill mean by “intellectual diversity” or what it proposes to remedy; it is never quite clear in the bill, but “intellectual diversity” has long been the language right wing extremists have used to push their agenda, which includes shrinking dissent, mandating thought, and intimidating professors and students who do not conform to their ideological program. The phrase itself became popular with far-right culture warriors like David Horowitz who advised his fellow travelers to use this very language to turn our universities into tools of political indoctrination. Here is Horowitz in 2003: “I encourage you to use the language that the left deployed so effectively on behalf of its own agendas... Say there is a lack of “intellectual diversity” on college faculties and in academic classrooms. Say the conservative viewpoint is “under-represented” in the curriculum and on its reading lists” (“The Campus Blacklist”). In SB1, as in our neighbor Indiana’s near identical SB 202, “intellectual diversity” emerges as a vague term because it is now and has always been a rhetorical smokescreen. It is a calculated attempt to obscure the actual rigorous debate and learning that unfolds in college classrooms. The public should understand “intellectual diversity” as the phrase’s originators and popularizers understand it: as a Trojan horse that arrives promising to enrich intellectual life with diverse viewpoints, but in fact aims to narrow thought, silence dissent, and enforce its own strict ideological preferences.

Because the bill ties funding and job security to “intellectual diversity,” it legislates not freedom of speech, but enforces a chilling of speech; it does not open the way for more robust intellectual debate, but suffocates it with the ever-present threats of financially harming institutions if they do not demonstrate ideological compliance. I would draw the public’s attention to the ironic fact that a bill that claims to value intellectual diversity and freedom of speech is also full of dictates about what can and cannot be taught. It mandates, for example, an “American Civic Literacy” course (on the surface, not a bad idea!), requires it for every student, and allows lawmakers to dictate what the readings and content will be. Why, we might wonder, is a bill presumably about enhancing academic and intellectual freedom so full of dictates, requirements, surveillance

mechanisms, and punishments for those individuals and institutions that don't align with its vision?

There are very real issues with higher education; administrative bloat, public distrust, very expensive athletics programs that lose money, the loss of talented, highly respected faculty, and ever-soaring costs continue to hobble the image and substantive work of universities. All of us opposing this bill would be eager to work with our legislators on these issues and help ensure our colleges and universities in Ohio remain one of this state's crowning gems. Yet, this bill does not address real problems. It conjures up a familiar, decades old caricature of a university where professors indoctrinate students and no one can utter the slightest disagreement or give voice to the slightest dissent. But that is not what unfolds in any college classroom, whether it is an intro course in biology or an upper-level seminar in my own discipline of literary history.

On any given day in my American literary history course, we address the most prized works of American literature—Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, W.E.B. Du Bois, Toni Morrison, Jesmyn Ward—that engage with historical events like slavery and the aftermath of the Civil War, the horrors of warfare in the twentieth century, and abiding concerns around state power and freedom; together, we nurture ways of reading, thinking, responding to one another, and practicing judgment. Our students bravely initiate and enter conversations, interrogate their own assumptions, and collaborate with peers who are unlike them in all imaginable ways to think through different ideas and historical realities. Ultimately, they learn to confront difficult ideas with precision, evidence, rigor, and care. They develop necessary skills such as critical thinking, close reading of cultural histories, evidence-based argumentation, and the strength to know when they are wrong and the grace and humility that should accompany them when they believe they are right. What I have offered here in a thumbnail sketch is not a scene of political indoctrination or ideological conformity. It is a space of free thought and interrogation, which is also an ordinary day in a college classroom. Yet, I believe, this is what troubles our legislators the most: a free-thinking citizenry equipped for democratic engagement.

I should say, though, that this bill is not without advantages, even if they're unintended. As someone who frequently teaches George Orwell's *1984*, I should thank the authors of this bill for so clearly illustrating the forms of state power and linguistic deception that Orwell warned against last century. I tend to caution my students from making too easy connections between Orwell's fictional world and our real one. But this bill will aid us all in understanding how fiction from the past might clarify the unfolding realities of the present, enabling us to see clearly how state power and ideological programming shape what we know and think and the conditions under which that education occurs.

As an Associate Professor at our state's flagship university, and as someone who cares deeply about all of our students, I ask you to consider strongly my testimony *opposing* SB 1 and vote NO on this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I hope you too will value the expertise of our educators, genuine intellectual freedom, and the future of our students.

Respectfully submitted,

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