

Subject: Urgent: Opposition to SB 1 – Protect Higher Education and Campus Equity

Dear Senator Roegner and Senator Wehner,

I am reaching out today because Senate Bill 1 poses an existential threat to Ohio's higher education system—not just for faculty, but for students, staff, and the principles that make our universities centers of research and development, learning, growth, and innovation.

I have dedicated my career to teaching and research. My career trajectory was inspired by my own educators at The Ohio State University, American University, and Kent State University, where I was taught to think critically and apply the skills and knowledge gained in the classroom to the world around me. I believe that higher education should empower students to think critically, engage meaningfully, and contribute to society as informed citizens. However, this bill would directly undermine my ability to teach, support students, and advocate for a fair and effective learning environment.

As a faculty member in the Department of Political Science at Kent State University, I work with students across the political spectrum. In my classroom, students are encouraged to engage in difficult conversations, question assumptions, and develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of the world. This democratic approach to education fosters the skills necessary for civic engagement and problem-solving – both of which are foundational to maintaining the freedoms and liberties at the bedrock of this country. Senate Bill 1, however, threatens these ideals by imposing restrictions on academic freedom, eliminating diverse voices, and limiting faculty governance.

As an example of the risks associated with the limits written into SB1, I share here an anecdote of a current student in my class. This student was brave enough to share with me and her fellow classmates her experience of being bullied as a teenager due to her gender identity and sexual orientation. This led to multiple suicide attempts before she found a supportive educational environment that allowed her to thrive. Without access to programs that promote inclusion and mental health support, many students like her might not make it to or through college. This isn't just about individual identity; it's about ensuring that all students have the opportunity to succeed academically and personally. When our students are successful, we benefit as a society from their innovations and contributions to our state and country.

Research confirms that inclusion programs improve student retention, reduce mental health crises, and foster environments where all students can reach their full potential. Dismantling these programs places vulnerable students at greater risk, increasing dropout rates, healthcare costs, and long-term economic consequences for the state. Regardless of our personal feelings about diversity and inclusion, student success and retention should remain a goal for every educational institution.

We do not have to speculate about what might happen if SB 1 passes. Florida's recent legislative actions, which restricted inclusion programs and tenure protections, have driven many faculty members to leave the state. Universities there are now struggling to recruit and retain talent, weakening their ability to compete nationally and internationally. Ohio faces similar risks. Implementing policies that curtail academic freedom and inclusion will deter top faculty and students from staying or coming to Ohio. This talent flight, or "brain drain," will undermine the quality of higher education, reduce innovation, and harm the state's economic competitiveness.

SB 1's ban on inclusion programming and other restrictions create a dangerous precedent. Today, the target is DEI; tomorrow, it could be research on climate change, poverty reduction, healthcare disparities, or other politically sensitive topics. Academic inquiry thrives on the freedom to explore complex issues without fear of retaliation – this is at the heart of education in a democratic society. Limiting this freedom jeopardizes evidence-based policymaking and innovation across all disciplines.

If passed, SB 1 would create a chilling effect on research, leading to censorship and a decline in Ohio's academic reputation. Students would lose access to diverse perspectives, critical thinking skills, and the ability to navigate a complex world—qualities essential for success in a competitive job market.

Ohio's economic future depends on a highly educated and diverse workforce. Programs promoting diversity and inclusion are not wasteful; they are investments that improve educational outcomes, reduce long-term public health costs, and enhance the state's ability to attract businesses and talent. Eliminating these programs would undermine these efforts, leading to higher rates of student failure and diminished competitiveness.

SB 1 also seeks to strip faculty of collective bargaining rights, including the ability to negotiate over tenure, workload, and performance reviews. It mandates post-tenure reviews that could facilitate politically motivated firings and requires student evaluations—often biased against women and faculty of color—to count for a significant portion of faculty assessments.

These provisions erode the conditions necessary for academic independence and stability. Faculty who feel unsupported or threatened will be less effective in their roles and more likely to leave the state, further exacerbating the brain drain.

The freedoms and liberties that are foundational to the United States include the right to free expression and the pursuit of knowledge without fear of censorship. These principles have driven progress in science, culture, and industry for generations, allowing the country to become a global leader in innovation. SB 1, however, undermines these core values by restricting academic freedom and imposing politically motivated controls on education. This bill contradicts the ideals of a free and open society, where diverse viewpoints and ideas are essential for both individual growth and societal advancement.

This is a critical moment for higher education in Ohio. If we do not act now, SB 1 will move forward, dismantling faculty rights, silencing student advocacy, and weakening our institutions. I urge you to consider this opposition to SB 1 and protect academic freedom, faculty rights, and equitable learning environments in Ohio.

Thank you for taking the time to stand up for academic freedom, labor rights, and inclusive education.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah Schmidt". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid, with a large, stylized 'S' at the beginning.

Sarah Schmidt, PhD

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Kent State University