

Feb. 10, 2025

Ohio Senate Higher Education Committee & Concerned Ohioans,

My name is Dr. Samantha Nousak, and I am writing to testify my opposition to Senate Bill 1 (SB1), the “Advance Ohio Higher Education Act.” I have obtained my bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees at Ohio universities and now research and teach as a postdoctoral scholar at Kent State University. My students have consistently praised my teachings of social science, history, and epistemology as being very balanced and sensitive to political issues, which is a trait I value highly in my classrooms. I understand the concerns that led to Ohio SB1 being reintroduced after the “Enact Ohio Higher Education Enhancement Act” failed in 2023. However, I believe this bill is dangerous and would cause immense harm to Ohio’s higher education system. It should not be passed.

While there are many portions of this bill that concern me, I want to focus on the most dangerous part of SB1: the unlimited power it gives the state of Ohio to deem facts it does not like as “controversial,” and then meddle in how those issues are taught and graded.

SB1 defines a “controversial belief or policy” as “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). It also requires that universities “Affirm and declare that faculty and staff shall allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies and shall not seek to indoctrinate any social, political, or religious point of view” (p.24) and that they “Demonstrate intellectual diversity for course approval, approval of courses to satisfy general education requirements, student course evaluations, common reading programs, annual reviews, strategic goals for each department, and student learning outcomes” (p.24). While this is intended to promote true intellectual diversity, in practice, it could be easily abused to mandate state-backed propaganda in classrooms.

It is easiest to see how this could be abused by looking to a past instance of similar censorship. When Galileo discovered that the Earth revolved around the Sun (heliocentrism), rather than the widely held belief that the Sun revolved around the Earth (geocentrism), this truth was labelled as ideological heresy and censored by governments and churches. Educators at the time were forced to perpetuate the lie of geocentrism so that the state could keep its influence. ***This*** was indoctrination. Keeping inaccurate information in classrooms just because it was politically convenient for those currently in power was the problem. ***Pretending an established, evidence-backed fact was actually still up for debate was the method of indoctrination.***

The truth is often controversial. Learning can be very uncomfortable. To progress as a society, we must push through that discomfort. Giving the state of Ohio the authority to declare inconvenient truths “controversial” and then meddle in how they are taught and graded enables immense abuses of power.

Ohio universities should teach quality evidence and the most current knowledge in each discipline. Political controversy is not a good gauge for accuracy or truth. There was recently a

small resurgence in flat Earth theories online, but those theories are simply wrong. The Earth is a globe. The political controversy stemmed from misinformation spreading on social media—but that there was controversy doesn't mean we should pretend that there is any good evidence behind it and award geology degrees to someone who believes the Earth is flat.

In the current era, it is obvious to almost everyone that the Earth is a globe revolving around the Sun. Someday, the controversies we are bickering about today will seem similarly obvious. The best way to move forward to that informed future is to keep state-mandated propaganda out of our classrooms. SB1 is an avenue for that kind of government overreach. One cannot only think about today's leaders, who you may personally trust, when passing legislation like this. You must imagine the abuses it could enable in the future and build in appropriate checks and balances against them. SB1 has no such protections.

Ultimately, degrees should only be awarded to students who can correctly separate the best-evidenced facts from politically-motivated ignorance and curricula should be developed to be up-to-date and accurate, without "diverse" facts that are just wrong. SB1 interferes with these foundations of our higher education system and contains no protections against abuses of power by the state.

Sincerely,
Samantha Nousak, Ph.D.