

Testimony of Nicholas Kawa, 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 Nicholas Kawa, and I am an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Ohio State University, where I have taught for 9 years. Today, I am here, however, to submit this testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

This bill aims to do many things to demoralize and intimidate university educators, but what I want to focus on is how it will inevitably inflict countless harms on students. By prohibiting educators and thus students from discussing any so-called “controversial belief or policy” in college classrooms, this bill essentially kills free speech and violates the constitutional rights of both faculty and students to discuss matters of broad societal interest and concern. Regardless of where students stand on the so-called controversial issues specified in this bill—including marriage, immigration, climate change, and foreign policy—they need to learn to engage in civil discourse with others on these subjects. They also need faculty mentors who can model from them how to do so. This is foundational to our democracy. It’s also necessary for navigating an increasingly complex yet interconnected world that is rife with uncertainty and divisiveness. To deny students the opportunity to freely discuss these vital issues—and to ponder diverse arguments and facts in relation to them—this bill will inflict harm on students because it will fail to prepare them for their futures as professionals, as family members, as neighbors and friends, and yes, as citizens, too.

If Ohioans can’t engage one another respectfully on controversial issues, then it is especially important that public institutions of higher education provide the tools and opportunities to do so. To ignore this challenge—or worse, to hide away from it—does a disservice to us all, including the very authors of the proposed senate bill.

Ohioans opposed this wildly unpopular bill when it was first introduced, nearly two years ago, as Senate Bill 83. I urge you to listen to the people of Ohio again and oppose SB 1. Thank you for the opportunity to present this testimony and I am happy to take any questions you may have.