

Opponent Testimony for S.B. 1
Higher Education Committee
February 11, 2025
Ken Irwin

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

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Ken Irwin. I am a librarian at Miami University and I have worked in higher education in Ohio for over 25 years. I want to note that I am speaking for myself, not on behalf of the university. I oppose many features of the proposed legislation, but I will focus today on the restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Among my chief concerns is the **lack of definition** of DEI in the bill.

I have been involved in many DEI efforts in my library and at my university. I believe that the work we have done contributes to an environment that helps students and staff to thrive. My sense is that the bill is particularly interested in restricting any effort to involve race or gender in hiring or admissions, and I understand why you might want to legislate about those things. But the group of practices that are collectively labeled as “diversity, equity, and inclusion” go far beyond that and include many things that I hope all of us support. DEI is the practice of care at an institutional level – it is about building our community in ways that all of our students feel a sense of belonging. Some examples include:

- Touring campus buildings with students with disabilities to learn about barriers they face in navigating campus spaces so that we can fix the problems,
- Creating programming to support first-generation students, or students who are veterans or parents,
- Upgrading soundproofing in study rooms to support neurodiverse students,
- Student-created art with messages of welcome,
- Making sure staff events take our colleagues' dietary needs into account.

Other programs may be aimed at supporting students from particular demographic groups. If we have a program to support first generation students or black men or LGBT students, it is not because they are being singled out as more or less deserving – it is because we know that a sense of belonging is important to thriving. If there is a demographic difference that makes you feel out of place, then having a support group in which you are able to see the shared struggles and find inspiration from your peers, it makes the struggle more survivable.

Rep. Tom Young has framed this bill as a workforce development bill – and that only works if students have the resources to help them thrive. Many DEI programs are aimed at just that – working with students who deserve to be here and helping them navigate the challenges that could keep them from completing their studies.

By banning all DEI offices and trainings, this bill would eliminate institutional structures that make our campus welcoming. I hope that many of the DEI activities I described are things you'd want our universities to do. I urge you to reconsider the scope of this bill and to not ban more than you intend to.

Thank you. Although I am not able to be with you in person this afternoon, I'm happy to answer any questions.