

Testimony of Melissa Foster, 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 Melissa Foster, and I am an instructor of Communication and General Education at The Ohio State University, where I have worked for 15 years. I do not represent The Ohio State University but am submitting testimony as a private citizen and as a parent of a current and a potential future OSU student. I strongly oppose Senate Bill 1.

As a professional educator, mom, and concerned citizen, my main objections to SB1 include the negative impact it would have on job preparedness for students and citizenship issues.

Job Preparation:

To succeed in the current job environment, students need to gain competency in soft skills (e.g., intercultural competency, communication, evidence-based analysis) and be able to relate their learning to the real world. SB1 would harm this ability by decreasing access to resources related to diversity.

In the social sciences, our goal is to describe, explain, and predict human behavior in the real world. We believe there is an objective reality and that research using the scientific method can get us as close as possible to understanding that objective reality. It's not a perfect system. For example, we can't know for sure the exact number of Americans who have anxiety disorders, how much less money women across Ohio are making in the same jobs as men, or what the specific emotional impacts of racial bias are for each individual person. However, we can use systematic analysis to get as close as we can to understanding that objective reality through scholarly investigation. Once we do that, we can make decisions based on evidence rather than feelings. This is a core part of academia. Feelings matter, but we need to include evidence in any important decisions.

To be able to put their analytic skills to use, students need to contextualize evidence in terms of real-world decision making. This is important because big issues often don't have clear-cut solutions (as much as we may wish that was the case). For example, there are times that media censorship can improve democracy (e.g., decreasing hate speech and Russian propaganda), but there are also times that media censorship can harm democracy (e.g., restricting access to unpopular information). No single censorship policy solves this issue. However, students can learn about the pros and cons of different policies (via evidence) and then create an opinion that is based on that evidence (rather than a knee-jerk reaction). Indeed, I often ask students to do this. Assignment instructions generally ask them

to research a topic, evaluate pros and cons, and form an opinion. I repeat to students many times “What your actual opinion is does not matter. What matters is your ability to support your opinion with evidence”.

The limits on classroom discussions proposed would harm students’ ability to practice this important skill. For example, if “controversial” topics such as climate change are overly regulated, students will not feel comfortable sharing their opinions and the evidence they based them on.

Citizenship:

Whereas learning about diversity issues improves the job readiness for individual students, it’s also a citizenship issue because it has pro-business implications as well. Businesses are more likely to be profitable, healthcare better quality, and resources more available when we have diversity. For examples see [diversity improves performance and outcomes](#) (Gomez & Bernet, 2019) and [diversity leads to better team performance](#) (Carucci, 2024). Limiting an organization's ability to foster diversity is government overreach that limits the organization’s ability to succeed.

As a parent, I would not send my youngest child to OSU (as I’m currently planning to do) if the current academic standards and efforts toward equitable citizenship are harmed. Lister (1997) defines citizenship as including civil rights (your ability to make decisions for yourself), social rights (access to shared resources), and political rights (your ability to participate in decision-making processes). Each of these rights would be harmed by SB1, which could create long-term negative effects for The Ohio State University.

As a citizen, I am greatly concerned that important decisions about shared resources are being made in a haphazard manner by individuals unwilling to evaluate evidence for critical thinking. I describe critical thinking to my students as the ability to look beyond the tip of your nose. There are many pieces of evidence available at the tip of your nose. These include factual information you learned in both formal and informal learning environments, your own lived experiences, and apparent short-term outcomes of decisions. All of that information at the tip of your nose is important in decision making. However, looking beyond the tip of your nose is also vital for citizenship. This includes looking at evidence from other people’s lived experiences, new information from scientific research, and potential long-term outcomes that may not be anticipated. That sort of thoughtful consideration is something my students are getting extremely skilled at, and I hope that our politicians can be role models for that instead of harming education.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Melissa M. Foster, PhD