

Testimony of Hongmei Li-Byarlay, Ph.D. F.R.E.S.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 8th, 2025

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

My name is Hongmei Li-Byarlay, and I am a professor of Entomology and Genomics at Central State University, where I have taught for 7 years. I do not represent Central State University, but as a private citizen who **is deeply concerned about the implications of Senate Bill 1**. As a faculty member in a scientific field, I believe that the pursuit of knowledge in my disciplines—entomology and genomics—requires academic freedom and the ability to explore complex issues in their full depth and diversity.

I view the university as a place where young minds should be encouraged to think critically, engage in open discussion, and form their own informed opinions. In my role, I aim to foster curiosity and scientific inquiry, and I worry that this bill would undermine the very essence of that mission. If enacted, Senate Bill 1 could potentially limit my ability to engage students in robust, thoughtful exploration of topics that are central to the study of entomology, including ecological impacts, species diversity, and the intersection of entomology with broader social and environmental issues.

Through my teaching and research, I have consistently emphasized the importance of understanding scientific concepts and their real-world applications—critical thinking is essential in developing solutions to environmental challenges. The discussions in my classrooms go beyond the basic transmission of knowledge; they include thoughtful debates on the ethical and social implications of entomological research. If the scope of academic inquiry is restricted, it would stifle my students' ability to engage fully with the material and to think critically about the issues they will confront in their future careers, particularly as they enter a rapidly changing workforce.

Senate Bill 1 risks creating an environment where educators are limited in how they can approach these crucial topics. I want to emphasize that I encourage open dialogue, ensuring that students are informed before arriving at their own conclusions. Without this space for free inquiry, we would be doing a disservice to students who are training to contribute meaningfully to science and society. Moreover, my work as an educator requires a deep commitment to presenting information that reflects the complexity of the scientific world. Whether I am discussing the role of insects in biodiversity or the impact of pesticides on ecosystems, I am dedicated to ensuring that my students gain a nuanced understanding

of these issues. To do this effectively, I must have the academic freedom to present challenging and sometimes controversial material without the fear of legal repercussions. I take great pride in my profession and my role as an educator. I ask that the state continue to trust my expertise and allow me the autonomy to teach my students the full scope of entomology, equipping them with the tools to become well-informed, critical thinkers. Restricting this freedom undermines the quality of education and the scientific inquiry that is fundamental to a university.