

Ohio SB 1 Opponent Testimony
February 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chari Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, thank you for taking the time to read my testimony today. I currently serve as a professor at the University of Cincinnati, though I am not officially representing my university today.

I specialize in citizenship education and have been commissioned to write major reports on civics education by the National Academy of Education and UNESCO. I have also written books on topics related to this bill, including free speech and political dissent in schools and universities.

I was raised to support Republican values, some of which appear aligned with Republican-sponsored SB 1. But I write to you today to urge you **not** to support this bill. While it may appear to champion free speech and celebration of the university as a marketplace of ideas, it invites or exacerbates the following serious problems, ultimately provoking results that will run counter to the values behind this bill:

- **Stifles free expression.** While the aim of protecting free speech and diversity of viewpoints on campuses is praiseworthy, the way that this bill carries out that goal actually *may inadvertently limit discussion, inquiry, and learning*. Designating a list of topics as controversial and threatening the withholding of funding or other punishments for those who steer students toward particular stances on those topics effectively creates a gag order. While one might claim that is hyperbole, evidence from similar divisive concept bans in K-12 settings across the country demonstrates that teachers have removed controversial topics from their teaching entirely because they fear that discussing them may be perceived as indoctrination, even if they do so in ways that are genuinely open inquiry. Carrying this out in universities would *stifle the speech of not only professors, but also of the students* who yearn to learn about these issues and who need to do so to be equipped for our world today. Indeed, curtailing learning opportunities about the policies and issues that most divide our country and plague our nation, heads off bright young minds from understanding our world and contributing to improving it.
- **Engages in big government overreach.** This bill engages in micromanagement, bringing government into the classroom at a time when many claim that we need to lessen the impact of politics in learning spaces. This bill tells faculty not only what to teach, but even requires specified readings that *emphasize particular political ideologies*. Yes, we should encourage students to learn about key texts in our country's founding and that shape our democracy today, but having a handful of legislators lay out in advance what counts as acceptable readings to foster the sorts of knowledge and civic skills our students need today is limiting and introduces ideological bents that this bill claims to want to head off.

- ***Risks safety and a constructive learning environment.*** Requiring professors to publicly post syllabi including particular dates, times, and locations when professors will discuss potentially controversial issues *invites disruption* to the learning environment and possibly even violence from those inside and outside of the campus community. Groups passionate about a topic may show up near the classroom, shouting and otherwise distracting students from learning and/or the professor from leading the course—*the very sort of cancel culture this bill claims to work against*. Several years ago, while midway into teaching a course about controversial policies, one of my students brought a gun to class and used it to threaten me to give him a higher grade. In response, I felt great intimidation and deferred to him throughout the remainder of the semester for fear of the safety of myself and my students. He used our class as a soapbox for his extreme political views. Open postings provide students and outsiders the information they need to engage in an array of worrisome behavior that blocks learning and a fair balancing of perspectives in the course.
- ***Reveals underlying views about learning about an array of ideas.*** If, deep inside, those supporting this bill actually feel happy or relieved that certain ideas would be purged from university discussion, I urge those supporters to consider that such a stance limits freedom of expression and harms a fundamental role of universities as the marketplace of ideas. Upholding commitments to free speech and intellectual diversity, as this bill claims to do, requires including even those ideas that one may personally abhor.

In sum, this bill effectively produces and exacerbates some of the same problems it seeks to address, thereby making the situation worse rather than better. I urge you not to support SB 1.

Respectfully,
Dr. Sarah Stitzlein