

February 9, 2025

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

Please accept this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 1, the deceptively named “Advance Ohio Higher Education Act”. My name is Dr. Rachel Stehle and I am a professor of sociology at Cuyahoga Community College. I am submitting this testimony as a private citizen, and not on behalf of my institution.

The attack on diversity, equity and inclusion programs as outlined in this bill is reprehensible, contradictory, and frankly, embarrassing. The purpose of higher education is to produce informed and educated citizens to participate in a democratic society, and more broadly, in a global economy. Which part of that sentence is so bothersome that it would inspire such a small-minded and harmful proposal? Of course, this includes all citizens, without exclusion. However, by denying students and employees at higher education institutions the access and opportunity to diverse programming, events, and curriculum, we are severely limiting the growth of our students and our community into a cohesive, unified society.

Senator Cirino referenced the Progressive Educator, John Dewey, in his testimony, but incorrectly concludes that “[Dewey] would certainly have been against the woke conformity we see on so many campuses...” (para. 14). In fact, Dewey explicitly provided a blueprint for curriculum inclusion that would instill within students the knowledge necessary to enact social reform. Dewey suggested “the ideas of ethics and social science are tools for promoting understanding and solving social problems that would otherwise cause serious conflicts in society” (Garrett, 2003, p. 3). He also believed that “history is of educative value in so far as it presents phases of social life and growth...when taken simply as history it is thrown into the distant past and becomes dead and inert. Taken as the record of man’s social life and progress it becomes full of meaning” (Dewey, 1897, p. 5). Meaning is constructed and shared through interactions, conversations and simply living amongst one another. This is what diversity, equity, and inclusion programming allows us to nurture. It doesn’t destabilize us; it makes us stronger together.

Sec. 3333.045. of SB 1 mandates that educational programming be developed to train each board member at each university. Exactly how do you expect to train board members with respect to “student welfare issues, including... the general physical and psychological well-being of undergraduate and graduate students” (N, p. 3) without including any of the curriculum that is covered under diversity, equity, and inclusion programming? And why do the board members deserve this “educational programming”, but students do not? These are not “controversial beliefs or policies”; this is the reality of our diverse college communities. We do not all live the same life, but we are all living this life together in this society. These are the communities that college students are a product of; they have a right to curriculum and programming that includes an exploration of their sociocultural-historical perspective. It is commonly understood that learning more about other people and other perspectives reduces conflict and contributes to an individual’s ability to empathize with someone different than themselves. Students want to learn. They are inquisitive and insightful, and at times, they are more closely connected to the

topics I am teaching and have more first-hand knowledge than I do. My students deserve to have their voice heard in my classes without fear of being censored. Academic freedom applies to students as much as it applies to faculty.

The reality is, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives benefit everyone, and there is ample evidence that the benefits far outweigh any perception of harm. The American Council on Education's statement on the importance of diversity in higher education is clear:

Diversity enriches the educational experience. We learn from those whose experiences, beliefs, and perspectives are different from our own, and these lessons can be taught best in a richly diverse intellectual and social environment. It promotes personal growth-and a healthy society. Diversity challenges stereotyped preconceptions; it encourages critical thinking; and it helps students learn to communicate effectively with people of varied backgrounds. It strengthens communities and the workplace. Education within a diverse setting prepares students to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork; and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions. It enhances America's economic competitiveness. Sustaining the nation's prosperity in the 21st century requires us to make effective use of the talents and abilities of all our citizens, in work settings that bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds and cultures.

I must conclude this letter of opposition by reminding our elected officials that this bill is a regurgitation of Senate Bill 83, which was unceremoniously rejected at the end of the last legislative session after several revise and resubmits. In academia, we call this a failure. Furthermore, let us not forget the overwhelming defeat of Senate Bill 5 in 2011 by the vote of Ohio citizens, which clearly indicates the position of the general public when it comes to attacking collective bargaining and workers' rights. We will lose enrollment, we will lose researchers and scholars, we will lose future employees, and we lose our competitive global edge because our schools will be limited in what they can offer a student population that is as diverse as the society they live in.

Respectfully submitted in opposition of Senate Bill 1,

Rachel M. Stehle, Ph.D

Citations

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