

January 9, 2025

The Honorable Kristina D. Roegner, Chairwoman
Senate Higher Education Committee, Ohio Senate
1 Capitol Square
Columbus, OH 43215

Thank you for this opportunity to provide written opposition on Senate Bill 1: the Advance Ohio Higher Education Act. My name is Ilana Stouffer and I am a graduate student studying higher education and student affairs at Bowling Green State University. I write today on my own behalf representing my own views and not as a representative of my university.

This bill threatens all aspects, areas, and stakeholders in public higher education in the state of Ohio, seeking to censor what faculty can teach in the classroom and halting the crucial work of diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals who make college campuses safer places for those with marginalized identities. Decades of scholarship shows that these offices are critical in providing academic, cultural, and social support to students who are traditionally underrepresented, resulting in positive student outcomes, including improving students' persistence (Renn & Reason, 2021). Furthermore, such offices and spaces that promote diversity and equity improve the campus climate; build intercultural capacity, communication, and empathy for all students, regardless of their identities; and reduce harmful discriminatory behaviors and harassment for students, faculty, and staff (Renn & Reason, 2021). These centers, offices, and campus efforts build community and foster students' sense of belonging on campus, and it has been well documented that students' sense of belonging is greater when they interact with peers from different backgrounds than their own (Maestas et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2019). As such, these equity efforts lead to a positive sense of belonging that increase student achievement, adjustment, retention, and plans to graduate (Strayhorn, 2019). There is no question that these campus efforts that strengthen students' sense of community, membership, support, and acceptance at their institution improve students' academic and social experiences in college. To eliminate them would be both dangerous and harmful, not only to students, but to the success of Ohio's institutions, workplaces, and communities.

As an undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral student, I have engaged and worked with multiple diversity, equity, and global engagement-related offices, including campus-based women's and gender centers and interfaith offices. These spaces have shaped my education. Their staff welcomed me warmly, challenged me intellectually, and helped me grow as a student, scholar, and person. They have given me a sense of community and home at all four of the undergraduate and graduate public and private Ohio institutions I have attended. These centers do the same for countless other students, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, religion, class, or ethnicity. They provide mentorship and ensure that students like me can find the pathways to succeed in college and the intercultural competencies necessary to succeed and contribute to this state's economy. DEI work has nothing to do with political agendas. It is about creating equitable pathways and ensuring that our students—our state's and nation's future—have the resources, tools, community, and academic and social support they need to succeed, making Ohio stronger.

Concerningly, the passage of SB 1 will stifle and silence diverse views and marginalized voices. This bill purports to “promote intellectual diversity” against what its author has deemed “controversial beliefs or policies.” Yet, Senator Cirino refuses to acknowledge any diverse intellectual views—let alone those that are backed by scholarship, data, and fact—that would oppose his own views. Considering the author of this bill has ignored education professionals and stakeholders in higher education who oppose his views and who would be directly impacted by this bill, including passionate student groups and faculty organizations, demonstrates that this bill has no interest in truly fostering intellectual diversity. True intellectual diversity and intellectual agency encourages curiosity and the free exchange of ideas. This bill has no intention of hearing differing opinions, voices, or encouraging any debate.

This bill is about stifling opposing views. It is about silencing those from different backgrounds with marginalized experiences. It is made to silence research-based data, facts, and scholarship about inequality, inequity, discrimination, and the benefits of diversity. SB 1 seeks to erase documented truths about structural barriers, systemic oppression, and privilege. It undermines academic freedom in an attempt to create chilling effect on scholarship that addresses these critical issues. If passed, this bill will silence every citizen’s free speech. I cannot emphasize enough the fact that this bill is a direct attack on our First Amendment right to free speech. This aspect is particularly alarming and should compel everyone who values their right to freely express ideas without government censorship or punishment to oppose it.

In conclusion, I implore you to oppose SB 1 for all of the reasons described above. I appreciate your consideration of these concerns and strongly encourage you to vote accordingly.

Thank you,
Ilana Stouffer