

Testimony of Gregory Wilson, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina D. Roegner, Chair

February 11, 2025

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

My name is Gregory Wilson, and I am a distinguished professor of history at the University of Akron, where I have taught for almost 25 years. I do not represent the University of Akron but rather I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1. I teach courses in US history, as well as Ohio history, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Like SB83 from 2023, there are major flaws with SB1. Let me highlight one important area where it overlaps with my experience.

The bill's sponsors claim that it promotes free expression, but its rules and requirements will lead to the opposite. Paradoxically, the bill seeks to prevent indoctrination by indoctrination. As with SB83, which I also opposed, SB1 is a bill that assumes a crisis that does not exist. It should be a sign that it is unnecessary and unwarranted when students, faculty, administrators, and Boards of Trustees, and newspaper editors are all opposed to it. My students, whether they are self-avowed conservatives, moderates, or liberals, find this bill not only unnecessary, but condescending. They resent the fact that the government is trying to tell them what to read and how to think. They are hungry to learn, to develop their own ideas, and think for themselves. In this way, the bill is based on a basic misunderstanding of what happens in our classrooms. Professors do not engage in indoctrination of students. Never in my nearly quarter of a century of teaching have I been accused of such a thing. On the contrary, higher education classrooms value a free exchange of ideas. We want students to think for themselves – that is the point! I assign a wide range of documents and other sources from a variety of viewpoints and demand that students analyze those sources and draw their own conclusions about their strengths and weaknesses, assumptions and arguments. These include the U.S. Constitution, King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," and the Ohio Constitution.

Terms like "intellectual diversity" and "controversial belief or policy" remain vague and could also easily prevent the very free expression protected by the First Amendment that the bill is intended to support. The U.S. Constitution was, and remains, a document "subject to political controversy" both at the time and since. Any discussion of the amendments, for example, is grounded in controversy. The Ohio Constitution was also controversial; and at several points Ohioans lifted their voices to change it. King's letter from jail cannot be divorced from discussions that are controversial, including the civil rights movement, which focused on identifying oppression and segregation. Beyond these brief examples, this bill would prevent students from learning entire subjects, even those

that the sponsors insist students need. And ironically, with such vague language, all manner of legally unprotected speech could be allowed in the classroom. This could lead to stress, strain, fear, and violence on college campuses, and create protracted and expensive litigation.

I am even more sensitive to these issues now than I was in 2023 when SB83 was introduced. Since then, the direct threats to our safety and our democracy have only increased. Indeed, we need a civil society that values universities for their ability to train students in independent analysis and critical thinking. This bill directly undermines that ability. Along with this, I have a child preparing to enroll in a public university. We both want to feel confident that the university will do its utmost to ensure my child's physical safety, to encourage critical thinking, and to train my child for a career and to be a successful citizen. If this bill becomes law, neither of us will have that confidence.

If the sponsors and members of the Committee are truly interested in helping ensure academic excellence at Ohio's public colleges and universities, then they will promptly vote no on SB1. In its place could come new legislation truly aimed at solving the issues that face our state and higher education in terms of dropping enrollments, rising costs, and loss of funding. In creating such new legislation, sponsors could involve the faculty in the University System. They would find them a smart bunch, gladly willing to help with many great ideas to truly preserve and protect our public colleges and universities.

Thank you for the opportunity to present written testimony.

Sincerely,

Gregory Wilson

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