

Testimony of Sara Watson, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 9th, 2025

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

My name is Sara Watson, and I am an associate professor of political science at The Ohio State University. I do not represent OSU, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1.

SB 1 covers vast terrain, including issues as varied as the right to strike, tenure protections, “bias” in the classroom, mandatory DEI trainings, and partnerships with Chinese institutions, among others. In today’s testimony, I’m sure you will hear from opponents on most, if not all, of these areas. However, I wish to focus my comments on two broad problems with the bill: vagueness in its language around indoctrination and free expression, and problems of government over-reach.

SB 1 requires that faculty run classrooms “committed to expressing intellectual diversity” and yet prohibits faculty at Ohio universities from speaking out on what it calls “controversial policies and beliefs,” which includes “any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.” Equally worrying, the bill requires Ohio faculty members to “allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies...” If SB 1 passes, it would prohibit me— a political science professor— from teaching about the dynamics of elections because it is one of the proscribed “controversial beliefs.” This problem is not limited to the study of elections. The bill’s language also suggests that professors can’t provide a test on evolutionary science, where there are clearly correct and incorrect answers. If, by providing a correct answer to a factual question, a student can file a complaint against a faculty member because it violates the student’s version of reality, then we are in trouble.

One might argue that SB 1 makes an exception for “the exercise of professional judgment about how to accomplish intellectual diversity within an academic discipline, unless that exercise is misused to constrict intellectual diversity.” But again, who decides that intellectual diversity is being “constricted”, and how? SB 1, with its sloppy, vague language—is unclear on this question. This passage could be interpreted any which way by an overzealous prosecutor. The effect on actual speech on campuses will necessarily be chilled, as instructors will worry that any mildly controversial topic brought up in class could be construed as inculcation.

SB 1 would also prohibit our universities from engaging in basic acts of civic education. Under this law’s requirement that universities affirm that they will permit students to reach their own conclusions about “controversial policies and beliefs” such as climate policies or electoral politics, for example, it seems likely that universities would be unwilling to sponsor Earth Day programming, or get out the vote efforts. SB 1 would directly undercut efforts to fulfill Ohio

State's land grant mission of "Education for Citizenship."

Let's be clear. Far from protecting intellectual diversity and eliminating "bias" in college classrooms, SB 1 represents a blatant effort to restrict the free exchange of ideas on Ohio campuses. It threatens to censor students' ability to critically engage with competing perspectives by chilling instructor speech. The bill's sponsor, Senator Jerry Cirino, has acknowledged this in multiple press conferences and media interviews, referencing "woke ideology" and "woke fiefdoms" in Ohio universities as justification for this bill. Senator Cirino seems to believe that indoctrination permeates teaching and learning at Ohio public colleges and universities.

This is simply not the case. Rather than embrace this law, Ohio lawmakers should be asking: How can Ohio universities effectively "equip students with the intellectual skills they need to reach their own, informed conclusions on matters of social and political importance" (as SB 1 exhorts)? Instructors in higher education cannot engage in this important act if they fear being persecuted by a faceless bureaucracy. Moreover, the removal of academic freedom protections inherent in so-called post-tenure review policies and retrenchment policies put not just "liberal" voices at risk, they also threaten the conservative voices that Ohio lawmakers seem bent on protecting with this law.

The other major problem with this bill is that it is an example of massive government over reach. SB 1 requires that Ohio universities spend millions of dollars on monitoring "intellectual diversity" in proving that it cannot obtain accreditation requirements elsewhere before providing DEI training, in relations with China. Some of this monitoring is duplicative of existing federal requirements. SB 1 also goes so far as to codify in law not just specific course requirements (mandatory course in US government or history) but also specific readings. Asking students take certain courses is, in itself, not objectionable—many universities do so as part of their general education requirements. What is objectionable is that Ohio lawmakers are taking this decision upon themselves, rather than permitting universities to make their own choices about such requirements. Moreover, SB 1 doesn't stop at requiring a certain course—it even specifies a mandatory reading list for said courses and the format of final exams. Why is this degree of micro-management of Ohio universities by the Statehouse appropriate?

The sad reality is that SB 1 threatens Ohio universities' proud history of promoting engaged citizenship through open debate and deliberation. I urge the members of this Committee to stand up for true intellectual diversity -- and to resoundingly reject Senate Bill 1.

Sincerely,

Sara E. Watson