

Reconsider Senate Bill 1: Preserve the Integrity of Higher Education in Ohio

Senate Higher Education Committee

Ohio Senate, Columbus, Ohio

February 09, 2025

Dear Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony regarding the reshaping Ohio's higher education system.

My name is Victor St. John, an Assistant Professor at the John Glenn College of Public Affairs at The Ohio State University (OSU) acting on behalf of myself, but drawing on my professional experience. Based on the legacy of the late U.S. Senator, veteran, and public servant John Glenn, I believe he would argue that institutions like OSU thrive when they are allowed to operate under the principles of shared governance - where students, faculty, administration, and trustees collaborate to ensure the highest standards of education and research, free from undue political interference. In turn, as you prepare to vote on Senate Bill 1, I write to respectfully share my opposition.

Partnership and Shared Governance is Strategic

Senate Bill 1 represents a shift from a framework of state oversight, guidance, and partnership to one of de facto management of student education and college experiences that supersedes the established academic governing structures and policies of public universities. Such a change undermines the autonomy and effectiveness of public institutions like OSU and carries significant implications for operations, including the proposed restrictions on tenure practices. This is concerning because, Senate Bill 1 is also a departure from the traditional and strategic balance that has allowed public universities to thrive under the principles of shared governance: a system where state legislatures, governing boards, faculty, students (who are most important) and other stakeholders work collaboratively to uphold academic integrity, institutional autonomy, and the interests of students who pay to attend. By imposing top-down control and restricting the foundational tenure system, among other elements, this bill risks diminishing the quality of education, curbing academic freedom, and weakening Ohio's ability to attract and retain world-class scholars and student enrollment.

Students First, Faculty Second

The management of public universities, including OSU, is already embedded within robust university structures equipped with checks and balances. That is, detailed policies and procedures govern curriculum design, course instruction, and faculty governance, all with a student-centered focus. These structures are tested daily and have demonstrated their effectiveness through clear metrics over the years: relatively strong enrollment numbers, graduation rates, job placements, upward career trajectories as observed in alumni being present in the executive branch of the United States, limited student dissatisfaction with the state of the university curriculum and faculty, and manageable levels of student complaints. Students continue to choose OSU because of its well-established academic rigor, which meets their expectations and distinguishes the university from numerous other degree-granting institutions. To be clear, if the current practices outlined in the bill were problematic for our students it would not go unheard – our student body is courageously loud, for a lack of better words.

Restricting tenure, as proposed in this bill, risks profoundly diminishing the quality of education students have come to expect. Such restrictions would harm OSU's ability to attract and retain top scholars from across the nation and around the world - scholars who not only enhance the university's academic standing but also create transformative opportunities for students. These opportunities include externally funded research initiatives, unique cross-institutional collaborations, and innovative degree and curriculum developments that position OSU competitively against peer institutions. Eroding the tenure system will ultimately damage OSU's brand, limit its offerings, and undermine its reputation as a leading institution of higher education.

If the debate centers on whether OSU sufficiently promotes intellectual diversity or whether tenure practices need refinement, I urge the Senate to anchor its decisions in the wants and needs of students first and foremost. While you may feel free to ignore my perspective, I encourage you to listen to the students. Students are the ones who choose where to invest their money to receive an education, participate in student life - whether through athletics, clubs, or volunteer opportunities, and shape the future of our communities. I also encourage the Senate to slow down in considering student needs – the speed at which this is occurring does not match what students have shared are their concerns. Again, students should remain the primary focus of most decisions affecting public universities. While the perspectives of other stakeholders are important, students - particularly those from Ohio, who form much of our enrollment and community - should be the driving force behind any legislative changes to university governance.

A Vote to Wait

In conclusion, I respectfully recommend that the Senate vote against Senate Bill 1 in its current form. Its implementation could significantly hinder OSU's ability to deliver the high-quality education and transformative opportunities that our students deserve. This legislation risks harming student enrollment, disincentivizing faculty from joining or staying at OSU due to restrictive tenure policies and undermining the shared governance framework that has been a cornerstone of OSU's success for decades. Let us preserve the autonomy and academic excellence of our public universities for the benefit of all students in Ohio and beyond. At the very least, wait, and collect more information and concrete data in making a decision that will undoubtedly have immediate and long term effects across the state of Ohio.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Victor St. John