

Testimony of Mitchell Lerner Before the Senate Higher Education Committee  
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair  
Feb 11, 2025

Members of the Committee:

My name is Mitch Lerner. I am a professor of History at The Ohio State University, home of the NCAA football champions. The views I offer are my own and do not represent those of my employer.

I teach modern US political and diplomatic history, so I teach in many of the areas that this bill focuses on. I assure you that the notion of any sort of brainwashing or intolerance simply does not exist. Faculty want nothing more than to get students into conversation with each other, to spark debate and questions, and to create an atmosphere conducive to free discussion. In my class, I offer a series of “laws” that govern the semester: the first one that I mention in class, and the one I refer to most often, is that “there is no such thing as a wrong answer; only answers that are insufficiently supported.” I don’t care, I tell students, if you want to argue that the US got involved in Vietnam because of the influence of space aliens; if you feel like you can make that argument using legitimate historical sources, more power to you.

However, that aspect of my teaching is not why I am here today. I am also director of OSU’s East Asian Studies Center, which is largely supported by external grants. Some of those funds are federal, including a \$2.4 million grant we got from the government 3 years ago; some are private, like \$500,000 we recently got from a foundation to build an internship program to send students to summer jobs in East Asia. With that money, my Center focuses on supporting economic development for Ohio businesses and on advancing national security interests. Our graduates work for the CIA, the NSA, the DIA, the State Department, the Department of Commerce, and the Air Force Research Laboratory, along with relevant private sector positions, and they are armed with the language, cultural, and political expertise to better advance our security needs. The money we get also supports Ohio’s economy. In the most recent 3-year grant cycle, our events brought almost 1,000 people to campus, and supported off-campus events in partnership with local organizations that brought more than 140,000. In March, we are one of the hosts of the annual Asian Studies conference, which is coming to Ohio for the first time, with an expected 4,000 visitors who will eat in Ohio restaurants and stay in Ohio hotels. My center also works with the state business community to enhance their opportunities overseas. Over the past few years, we have partnered with groups like the Columbus Council on World Affairs, JobsOhio, and the Fisher College of Business to provide information relevant to business and trade issues; for example, we are now in the midst of a series of events connecting Ohio business leaders with the head of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce for guidance about tapping into that market more effectively.

The problem is that SB1 has restrictions on our ability to engage with China. I recognize, and appreciate, that these restrictions have been lessened since the first version of the bill was released as SB 83. However, the existence of any limiting provisions puts us at a disadvantage in competing for these highly competitive grants, which cover all of East Asia rather than just China. No external reviewer would reasonably choose to fund Ohio over states that are completely devoid of restrictions, since the mere existence of any reporting requirements as spelled out in SB1 are a potential hurdle not offered by other states. The potential impact of the loss of these funds will thus not only hurt American national security expertise but could have significant consequences for local and state businesses and our economic growth. I therefore urge you to vote no on SB1.