

February 9, 2025

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify. My name is Kim Cook. I am a physical therapist who has worked in a variety of healthcare settings in northeast Ohio for 23 years. I am also currently pursuing a graduate degree in public health with a concentration in epidemiology. I am strongly opposed to SB 1 and its companion bill HB 6.

Several aspects of SB 1 concern me, as the entire bill has the capacity to severely downgrade the excellence of our state's institutes of higher learning. As the parent of a teenager contemplating her college choices, I fear legislation such as this will discourage her from remaining in Ohio.

Most concerning, however, from the perspective of a healthcare professional, is the prohibition of policies and activities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. These principles are not new. The Catholic university I attended over 20 years ago emphasized the importance of cultural competence and sensitivity within the healthcare setting. Back then we did not use the acronym DEI, but the ideas were the same. Additionally, I have attended numerous training sessions related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in my professional life. I can attest to the importance of the lessons learned.

Many of these were simple lessons and included discussions about cultural differences. One thing I learned was that people of some cultures find it rude to make eye contact with strangers. Persistent attempts at eye contact from a healthcare provider may instill fear or feelings of intrusion in such a patient. Mistrust of healthcare providers can be present in certain populations who have been subject to historical trauma at the hands of medical researchers – consider the horrors faced by the African Americans who served as research subjects during the unethical Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment. Members of the LGBTQ community remember well the discrimination they faced in healthcare institutions during the earlier years of the AIDS epidemic; certainly, some members of this community still face blatant discrimination today. Only a few years ago I worked with a patient who was obviously hesitant to reveal their status as a gay married person. It struck me that in the 2020s people would still be so fearful in a setting that should be safe. My diversity training went beyond race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation to address the unique needs of people with disabilities and sensory impairments. All people deserve the same quality healthcare but may require additional sensitivity and assistance in accessing that healthcare that many of us take for granted.

While SB 1 addresses educational institutions and not healthcare, I merely want to emphasize the importance I place on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. To pretend that we live in a society that has risen above discrimination is laughable. My 9-year-old son has reported classmates speaking poorly of Black people. 9 years old! How can we reconcile this in a country we claim to be founded on Christian principles?

I imagine college students belonging to minority groups face many of the same uncertainties that my patients do. Ensuring that those to whom we entrust their academic development can respond to their unique needs and offer assistance in reaching their goals does not discriminate against the majority. It merely levels the playing field so that all are granted the same starting line.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this discriminatory and destructive bill. My children – everyone's children – deserve better from this state.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Kim Cook