

Testimony of Mark G. Kafantaris
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 9, 2025

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

My name is Mark Kafantaris and I am writing in opposition to Senate Bill 1 as both a private citizen and a 2003 alumnus of The Ohio State University. I have lived my entire life in this State and consider its public universities and colleges to be its greatest asset. Public higher education provides the most affordable pathway to life-changing college education and allows students to earn four-year degrees with limited student debt. Those graduates will see immediate and compounding economic benefits from their degrees over the course of their lives. Those who achieve self-actualization in the process will also learn how to think critically about both themselves and the communities in which they live.

But public higher education doesn't just benefit Ohio's students. Graduates are more likely to contribute to Ohio's tax base while relying less on government assistance and subsidies. And that's not all. Public research universities, such as The Ohio State University, conduct two-thirds of university-based research along with a large share of federally funded research. This research, without question, enables a better understanding of the ever-changing world around us, cures diseases, and fosters innovations that promote economic growth.

But Ohio's vaunted system of public higher education did not blossom overnight. Instead, it was built brick-by-brick-by institutional self-governance and standards that were tried and tested over the past 150 years. The cornerstone of those standards is academic tenure. The principal purpose of tenure is to safeguard academic freedom. If faculty fear they can lose their positions because of their speech, publications, or research findings, they cannot fulfil their core academic responsibilities.

SB 1 is nothing short of an assault on academic freedom. It will enshrine into the law a culture of fear of reprisal from corporate and political institutions, such as yours, which take issue with its evidence-based conclusions by requiring the recognition of a plurality of perspectives along with acceptance of all of them under the guise of "intellect diversity." It will bog universities down with new far-reaching compliance standards and due-process remedies for those who believe they've been aggrieved by something as simple as a faculty member's affirmance as-fact of the existence of the holocaust. And it will order the complete dismantling of over 50 years of work in establishing safeguards for and the promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic universities.

SB 1 is a cure in search of a disease. Worst of all, its pernicious effects will undermine and erode this State's economy. It will deter prospective talent and drive-out

existing talent who insist on academic freedom to effectively do their jobs. In such a hostile climate, foreign and out-of-state students, who pay exorbitant tuition, will enroll elsewhere to be closer to America's diverse and open-minded institutions and to be part of communities that embrace cultural diversity. And we will all collectively suffer for it in Ohio. Innovation will dwindle, investment in our State will decline, and understanding of the world around us will succumb to a culture of fear. There are many reasons to reject this bill but the economic impact on this State is chief amongst them.