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## **Testimony**

Ohio Senate Bill 1 (SB 1) and House Bill 6 (HB 6) propose significant changes to higher education that could negatively impact academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the quality of education in the state. These proposed changes should not be implemented for the following reasons:

Banning diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs in our institutions is likely to have a substantial negative impact on student mental health and overall well-being. First, it should be noted that DEI is not affirmative action. It is a program created to provide support and a sense of belonging for first-generation students, minorities (Blacks, Latina, Asians) as well as students with disabilities. Research studies have revealed that students (such as minorities and those with disabilities) experiencing discrimination exhibit greater mental health distress compared to their peers. The removal of DEI programs may exacerbate these issues, as these initiatives were designed to support marginalized students. Thus, the elimination of DEI could leave these students without the necessary resources, potentially leading to increased anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. DEI initiatives often helped students develop skills to advocate for themselves and others. The loss of these programs may leave students less equipped to address mental health challenges related to discrimination.

Undoubtedly, the lack of academic freedom will cause faculty members to become more cautious about discussing certain topics to avoid perceived violations of the new rules, potentially affecting the depth and breadth of classroom discussions. As our ability to discuss controversial topics is limited, faculty will more than likely avoid addressing important but contentious issues, leading to a less comprehensive education for students. With limited academic freedom, without question, it would be very difficult to encourage students to develop their independent thinking and decision-making skills. SB 1/HB 6 could impose ideological restrictions on curricula, faculty speech, and institutional policies, undermining the intellectual diversity and critical thinking essential to higher education.

One major concern about the proposed bill is its arbitrary way of defining the teaching of controversial beliefs or policies. The bill defines controversial beliefs or policies as “any beliefs or policies that are the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion program, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.” The definition is so broad and confining that it would severely impair the ability of teachers in the fields of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences to teach their subjects. It is more than an existential question to ask – Who will decide which subjects are controversial and should not be taught? Should that be left up to the students or their parents, politicians, or the trained professionals with the expertise to do so? As the bill currently reads, colleges’ curriculum will be determined by political whim, and devoid of cogent facts, scientific knowledge, and insights offered by trained professionals whose knowledge has been shaped by rigorous academic standards.

This is America, and as a democratic country, we should not go down the path of dictating to teachers and professors what should comprise the curriculum as we seek to build a more prosperous and educated America. Allowing for First Amendment rights of free speech and academic freedom would ensure that we continue to do so.

Imposing constraints on course content and faculty speech could deprive students of a comprehensive education that prepares them for the complexities of the modern workforce. Students must be exposed to diverse perspectives to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

As we, the faculty, lose the ability to collectively bargain for subjects within our disciplines, and get less influence over issues such as workload, compensation, and academic freedom, such control would lead to decreased job satisfaction and morale. I strongly imagine that the impacts of Senate Bill 1 (SB 1) and House Bill 6 (HB 6) will collectively lead to a less effective and dynamic educational experience for students, potentially compromising the quality of higher education in Ohio. Given these concerns, the proposed changes to higher education under SB 1/HB 6 should not be enacted. Instead, Ohio should focus on policies that support academic excellence, institutional autonomy, and student success.

Submit by:

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