

Testimony of Lesilie Allen Shigley Jr., Student
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
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Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Members of the Higher Education Committee:

My name is Lesilie Shigley. I am a 53-year-old junior studying history and religion at The Ohio State University. I do not represent Ohio State University; instead, I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

As someone who has been a professional for more than 30 years and is now back in the classroom doing what I love, I have some concerns about what is mentioned and restricted in Senate Bill 1. For instance:

1) Controversial Beliefs or Policies

- a) Defines controversial belief or policy as “any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.”
- b) Requires institutions to affirm and declare that faculty and staff will allow students to reach their own conclusions about such topics and will not attempt to indoctrinate any social, political, or religious view.
- c) Prohibits institutions from endorsing or opposing any controversial belief or policy with the exception of matters impacting the institution’s funding or mission.
- d) Requires institutions to respond to complaints from any student, student group, or faculty member about any alleged violations of these prohibitions.

This policy claims to protect students from indoctrination. Yet, it risks creating a system where specific ideological and religious perspectives—particularly those aligned with Christian nationalism—are implicitly favored while others are deemed controversial or inappropriate. As a student of history, I see clear parallels where ‘neutrality’ policies have functioned to suppress minority perspectives while reinforcing dominant cultural narratives.

By restricting an institution’s ability to take a stance on social and political issues, this policy could disproportionately impact academic discussions on religious diversity, pluralism, and the historical role of religion in public life. If a professor critically examines the rise of Christian nationalism in American history, would that be considered ‘indoctrination’ or just an honest historical analysis? If a faculty member discusses Islam, Judaism, or indigenous spiritual traditions in a way that challenges mainstream Christian narratives, would that be deemed controversial while Christian perspectives are not?

The ambiguity in defining ‘indoctrination’ opens the door for selective enforcement. If students can file complaints based on perceived bias, faculty may avoid discussing topics that challenge dominant religious and political ideologies. This creates a chilling effect, particularly for educators and students who come from religious traditions outside of Christianity or who wish to engage critically with Christian nationalism itself.

True academic freedom does not mean silencing institutions or educators under the guise of neutrality. Instead, it means fostering an environment where students can engage with diverse perspectives—including ones that challenge their own beliefs—to develop well-informed, critical understandings of history, religion, and society.

1) DEI Bans

- a) Prohibits any diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This includes orientations, training, offices or departments, contracts with third parties to promote DEI, scholarships, or replacing any of the aforementioned with other things that serve similar purposes.
- b) Allows for exceptions in order to receive grant funding, but requires approval from the chancellor.
- c) Requires any DEI “or related subjects” spending to be reported as part of the 5-year cost study (see #21).
- d) Requires institutions to respond to complaints from any student, student group, or faculty member about any alleged violations of these prohibitions.
- e) Requires institutions to implement a range of disciplinary sanctions for any employee who authorizes or engages in DEI training.

As a third-year History student with a minor in Religion, I approach the issue of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) bans with a historical and philosophical lens, recognizing the broader implications such policies have on education, institutional integrity, and societal development. This and other DEI bans raise serious concerns regarding academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and the ability of universities to foster inclusive learning environments.

Historical and Institutional Context

The outright prohibition of DEI initiatives in section A ignores the historical role that diversity and inclusion efforts have played in expanding access to education and rectifying systemic inequalities. American universities have long been spaces where social progress and equal opportunity have been championed. From integrating public schools after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to implementing Title IX protections, policies designed to promote equity have been fundamental in ensuring higher education serves all students, not just those from historically privileged backgrounds.

By prohibiting orientations, training, and even scholarships tied to DEI, this policy effectively dismantles mechanisms that help students from diverse backgrounds succeed. This is particularly troubling from a historical standpoint, as it echoes past efforts to suppress civil rights progress in the name of “neutrality.” For example, during Reconstruction, similar arguments were used to justify the rollback of policies designed to support newly enfranchised Black citizens, leading to

the rise of Jim Crow segregation. The absence of explicit discriminatory laws does not create an equal playing field; instead, it often maintains existing disparities.

Implications for Academic Freedom and Institutional Autonomy

The provisions in sections D and E are particularly concerning because they introduce a culture of surveillance and punishment within academia. Allowing any student, student group, or faculty member to file complaints against alleged violations could create a chilling effect where faculty and administrators avoid discussing issues related to race, gender, and historical injustices for fear of professional repercussions. The enforcement mechanisms, including disciplinary actions against faculty members for merely engaging in DEI training, directly threaten academic freedom.

I have encountered numerous historical examples of academic repression in my studies when governments or institutions sought to control what could be taught. During the McCarthy era, accusations of communist influence led to widespread purges of educators and scholars, stifling intellectual discourse and silencing critical perspectives. Similarly, this DEI ban risks discouraging honest discussions about race, religion, gender, and social structures—subjects that are fundamental to the study of history and religion.

Religious and Ethical Considerations

From a religious studies perspective, the ban also presents ethical concerns. Many religious traditions emphasize justice, community, and care for the marginalized. Christian teachings, for example, often reference the moral duty to uplift the oppressed (Matthew 25:40, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"). Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and other faith traditions similarly stress compassion, equity, and social responsibility. The categorical rejection of DEI initiatives seems at odds with these principles, as it removes institutional mechanisms that promote fairness and inclusivity.

Moreover, the policy does not seem to apply evenly across ideological perspectives. While DEI efforts are framed as controversial or unnecessary, other forms of institutional messaging—such as those aligned with Christian nationalism or traditionalist values—may not be subject to the same scrutiny. This selective approach raises concerns about whether the ban is genuinely about neutrality or simply reinforcing dominant cultural and ideological narratives while suppressing alternative perspectives.

Financial and Practical Concerns

The exception for grant funding in section B highlights a contradiction in the policy. If DEI initiatives are deemed unnecessary or harmful, why allow them when financial incentives are involved? This suggests that the prohibition is not based on principle but rather on political posturing. Including a reporting requirement in the 5-year cost study, as mentioned in section C, further underscores how DEI efforts are being singled out for scrutiny in a way that other institutional expenditures are not.

Furthermore, universities compete on a national and global stage, and many private institutions and corporations prioritize diversity initiatives. By banning DEI efforts, public institutions risk

failing to prepare students for diverse workplaces and environments where cultural competency is valued. This could negatively impact both student preparedness and institutional reputations.

Ultimately, this DEI ban is more about ideological control than genuine educational reform. It disregards universities' historical role in fostering diversity and addressing social inequalities, threatens academic freedom, and selectively enforces restrictions that likely benefit dominant religious and political ideologies. Rather than banning DEI, universities should be encouraged to engage in open, critical conversations about diversity and inclusion, ensuring that all students—regardless of background—have an equal opportunity to thrive.