

Testimony of Elizabeth Sheehan, Ph.D.
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 Elizabeth Sheehan, and I am a professor of English at The Ohio State University. I do not represent The Ohio State University, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I have dedicated my life to providing students with access to art and ideas that will enrich their lives, including by helping them to orient themselves in times of crisis, like the one we are living in. It is thus profoundly disappointing to me that the Ohio Senate is considering a bill that will make it more difficult for universities in Ohio to provide the kind of high-quality education that students deserve. The bill does that in many different ways, but I want to focus on the way it limits student and faculty access to knowledge and worsens learning conditions for students.

The bill requires faculty to allow students to “reach their own conclusions” about topics that are the subject of “political controversy” such as “climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion.” That sounds okay; certainly one of the main things I seek to teach students is how to make their own evidence-based arguments. It is telling, however, that, in the bill, the definition of topics subject to “political controversy” is closely followed by the complete prohibition against “any orientation or training course regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion.” So even as the bill appears to encourage intellectual rigor, it shows its true aim: to limit access to the kind of knowledge and experience that are essential to understanding many topics. If this bill passes, students might “reach their own conclusions,” but the information on which those conclusions will be based is more likely to be partial and incomplete.

The bill also limits student access to knowledge by allowing programs to be cut based on a very broadly defined processes of “retrenchment.” The definition is so expansive that it would allow the university to cut essential programs just because of low student enrollment over a short period of time. The ability of students in Ohio to, for example, learn a language in college should not depend on a badly conceived version of consumer demand. That same policy of retrenchment effectively removes basic employment guarantees for faculty. And the bill doubles down on that by prohibiting faculty from striking. Ohio universities will not be able to hire and retain high-quality faculty if faculty

know they will work under conditions in which they cannot bargain collectively and are far more likely to be fired than colleagues at comparable institutions.

There are many things to criticize in this bill, but I will conclude by emphasizing that, even if no faculty are punished because of what this bill says, the bill makes conditions worse for student learning. That is because, in numerous ways, including by making syllabi public, it invites attacks on faculty by people and groups who do not know what counts as high-quality research or teaching in a given field of study. Whether or not a faculty member is disciplined based on a complaint against them, the bill will cause professors to teach as if there is a target on their backs. That does not encourage good pedagogy and thus it is not good for students.

In short, students in Ohio need and deserve the best education that faculty can provide, and this bill makes it harder for students to get that education. It will help to create a situation in which students who can afford to go to college out of state will get a better education than students who study at public universities in Ohio. That is unacceptable.

I ask you to consider my testimony and to vote no on this harmful bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.