

Testimony of L. Justin Wheeler, MSW, LISW-S
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:

Thank you for the opportunity to share this testimony. My name is Justin Wheeler, and I am an assistant professor of instruction in social work at Ohio University, where I have taught full-time for nearly five years following five years as an adjunct. I do not represent Ohio University but am testifying as a private citizen. I am writing to oppose SB 1, a bill that claims to defend free inquiry and intellectual diversity but in practice does the exact opposite. While it requires universities to support students' intellectual growth, its provisions would severely restrict educators' ability to do so.

Free, rigorous inquiry does not mean avoiding difficult topics that may make people uncomfortable. Intellectual diversity does not mean legislating which views can be expressed or restricting the critical examination of ideas. To develop the intellectual skills to reach informed conclusions requires engaging with opposing perspectives, not suppressing them. Yet this bill contradicts itself repeatedly, undermining the very values it claims to promote.

For example, in Section 3345.0216(A), the bill states that institutions must support equality of opportunity. Yet Section 3345.0217(B.1) bans diversity, equity, and inclusion programming, including scholarships. If we are truly committed to equal opportunity, why eliminate the very programs designed to level the playing field for underrepresented students?

In Section 3345.382, the bill claims to encourage intellectual diversity while mandating a civic literacy course with pre-approved content promoting a specific view of American capitalism. If we trust students to think critically, why is the state prescribing what they must learn in an ideologically driven course?

The bill also prohibits a long list of so-called "divisive concepts" in training sessions (Section 3345.88(B)). In my ten years in higher education, I have never encountered these ideas in training. But the prohibitions raise a critical question: how would enforcement work? If a participant simply feels uncomfortable in a discussion about race or gender, does that mean the training violated the law? The bill claims to protect free inquiry yet restricts multidimensional discussion of concepts like meritocracy and work ethic. How can we foster a full range of perspectives as the bill claims to promote if certain viewpoints are off-limits?

Also troubling is Section 3345.0217(B.3-5), which would have a chilling effect on faculty teaching subjects deemed "politically controversial." Higher education does not exist to shield students from challenging ideas; it prepares them to navigate complexity as they reach their own conclusions. The bill claims to prevent indoctrination, but how does it differentiate between a professor presenting evidence for and against a policy versus indoctrination? The

language is vague, opening the door for legitimate academic discourse to be mischaracterized and suppressed. Finally, Subsection 7 states that students cannot be required to affirm a belief in order to obtain a degree. I ask: when has this ever happened? Like much of SB 1, this is a solution in search of a problem.

At its core, this bill is not about intellectual freedom. It is an attempt to regulate ideas, dictate curriculum, and control how educators engage with students. It is also a waste of legislative time and taxpayer dollars—fueling unnecessary culture wars instead of addressing real issues in higher education. As an educator, I do not need the state to tell me how to foster free inquiry in my classroom. My students—who come from all walks of life and hold conflicting ideologies—engage thoughtfully with me and with each other in the pursuit of knowledge. They do not need overreaching laws policing their intellectual growth.

I urge you to reject SB 1 and appreciate your consideration.