

Testimony of Summer L. Shigley, BCTMB, LMT
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
11 February, 2025

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

My name is Summer Shigley, and I am a student of Comparative Religious Lore and History at Ohio State University. In addition to my current role as a student, I have also served as an educator at a different institution. I do not represent Ohio State University; rather, I am submitting testimony as a private citizen opposing Senate Bill 1.

I am writing to express my strong opposition to Ohio Senate Bill 1, a piece of legislation that I believe directly threatens academic freedom, the integrity of higher education, and the vital role of the humanities in fostering critical thinking and civic engagement. As a medical massage therapist with 34 years of practice, an educator with 8 years of experience teaching anatomy and physiology, a small business owner for 24 years, and a current student of Comparative Religious Lore and History, I have a unique perspective on the detrimental impact this bill would have on Ohio's students, educators, and workforce.

SB1 threatens to politicize education by shifting the governance of public colleges and universities away from experienced faculty and academic professionals to politically appointed boards. Specifically, the bill proposes to amend sections 3335.02 and 3335.09 of the Revised Code, altering the composition and appointment processes of university boards of trustees. This shift undermines the core principles of academic independence, placing crucial educational decisions in the hands of individuals who may lack the necessary experience in higher education. Such changes endanger the quality of instruction and research, particularly in the humanities, which are already under attack nationwide.

The bill includes provisions that could limit the scope of academic inquiry. For instance, it mandates the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and training, as outlined in the proposed new section 3345.0217(B)(1) of the Revised Code, which states:

"No state institution of higher education shall require any student, faculty, or staff member to engage in any form of mandatory diversity, equity, or inclusion programming or training."

This prohibition could lead to a constrained academic environment where specific topics are discouraged, thereby limiting students' exposure to a broad spectrum of ideas. This is an attack on the humanities and an assault on the fundamental freedoms protected under the First Amendment. Academic institutions should be places where diverse viewpoints are encouraged, not censored or dictated by the state's political agenda.

From my experience as a small business owner, I understand the vital role a well-rounded, critically educated workforce plays in economic success. Ohio's competitiveness depends on students who can think independently, communicate effectively, and engage in complex problem-solving, skills cultivated through exposure to the humanities and social sciences. Curtailing these disciplines would disservice students, employers, and the state's long-term economic prospects.

Finally, as a first-generation college student currently excelling in academia, I know firsthand how transformative higher education can be. Policies like those proposed in SB1 create additional barriers for students, especially those from nontraditional backgrounds, by limiting access to a robust, well-rounded education. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives are essential in ensuring that all students, regardless of background, ability, or circumstance, have access to quality education and the resources they need to succeed. DEI programs are not just about race and gender; they encompass policies that provide access to education for nontraditional and marginalized students, including first-generation college students, veterans, students with disabilities, and individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These programs ensure that learning accommodations are available for students and staff with physical limitations, including those who have served our country and may require adaptive technologies or flexible learning options.

By eliminating DEI programs, Ohio Senate Bill 1 threatens to dismantle the essential supports that allow students with diverse needs to thrive in higher education. Such an approach does not promote fairness or neutrality; rather, it actively hinders access and success for those who rely on these programs to participate fully in academic life. If Ohio wants to foster success among its students and strengthen its institutions of higher learning, it must resist efforts that seek to limit intellectual diversity and academic freedom.

Ohio Senate Bill 1 stands in direct opposition to preserving the integrity of our higher education system. We have a responsibility to prioritize policies that protect free inquiry, encourage diverse perspectives, and uphold the First Amendment rights of students and educators alike.

Sincerely and with hope,

Summer Shigley (She/Her/Hers)

College of Arts and Sciences: Dean's List

Recruitment Co-Chair: Phi Sigma Pi National Honors Fraternity

Member: Alpha Alpha Alpha First Generation National Honors Society

Member: Lambda Alpha National Anthropology Honors Society

Member: American Folklore Society

Member: American Association for the Advancement of Science

Member: Association of Ancient Historians

Member: American Academy of Religion