

Dear Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and Committee Members,

My name is Robert Bognar, and I am a loyal taxpayer and a dedicated educator with 20 years of experience in Ohio's educational system. I write today to express my strong opposition to Senate Bill 1, which I believe threatens the core principles of higher education, academic freedom, and the rights of both educators and students.

As an educator, my commitment has always been to foster an environment that promotes critical thinking, diversity of thought, and a safe, respectful place for intellectual exploration. However, this bill, in its current form, undermines these very ideals and imposes numerous restrictions that will harm both educators and students alike.

I would like to highlight a few key provisions of the bill that I find particularly troubling:

1. Trustee Training and Terms

The proposal to reduce trustee terms from 9 years to 6 years is concerning because it undermines the continuity and long-term vision that long-term trustees provide. A shortened term could lead to a lack of institutional memory and stability, which is especially vital in the complex environment of higher education. Furthermore, while trustee training is important, the overbearing specificity of the training content, as proposed, risks politicizing the role of trustees, detracting from their ability to serve the institution's best interests.

2. Restrictions on Intellectual Diversity and Free Inquiry

The definition of "controversial beliefs or policies" in the bill is deeply problematic. Labeling issues such as climate change, electoral politics, and abortion as "controversial" and placing restrictions on how they can be taught or discussed in the classroom undermines academic freedom and discourages the very discussions that universities should be encouraging. By forcing faculty to allow students to reach their own conclusions without the freedom to correct misinformation, this bill opens the door to the acceptance of false or dangerous ideas under the guise of neutrality.

Moreover, the bill's emphasis on "intellectual diversity" as a requirement for course approval could be used to impose a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching that ignores the unique nature of academic disciplines and undermines professional judgment. The mandate to demonstrate intellectual diversity in courses could lead to forced inclusivity of viewpoints that conflict with the expertise and knowledge that professors have spent years developing.

3. Restrictions on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

The prohibition of DEI initiatives, training, and offices is one of the most harmful aspects of this bill. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential values that help universities become more accessible and welcoming to students from all backgrounds. The elimination of DEI programs will not only reduce opportunities for underrepresented groups but also send a damaging message that diversity and inclusion are not priorities in Ohio's educational institutions. This provision also risks diminishing the quality of education by discouraging the exploration of diverse perspectives and experiences that enrich learning.

4. Post-Tenure Review and Faculty Workload Policies

The proposed changes to post-tenure review and workload policies create an environment of fear for tenured faculty members, whose jobs may be jeopardized based on evaluations that could be influenced by political or ideological considerations. By mandating punitive post-tenure reviews for faculty who receive negative evaluations over two out of three years, this bill places unwarranted pressure on educators and may encourage them to self-censor or abandon academic freedom for fear of retaliation. This could lead to a loss of top-tier educators who are drawn to Ohio's institutions precisely because of the protections afforded by tenure.

5. Provisions Regarding Segregation and Full-Time Faculty Strike Ban

The language in the bill that prohibits any segregation based on race, ethnicity, or other protected categories in educational settings, while seemingly well-intentioned, overlooks the nuanced reality of how institutions often engage with these issues. In many cases, such programs are designed to address disparities in education, create supportive communities, and provide opportunities for students who may otherwise be marginalized. By banning these programs, the bill risks exacerbating inequalities that already exist in higher education.

Additionally, adding full-time faculty to the list of employees banned from striking is deeply concerning. Faculty members should have the right to advocate for fair wages and working conditions, just like any other workers. This provision takes away their right to collective action and could diminish the quality of education by diminishing faculty morale and empowerment.

Conclusion

As an educator, I am deeply committed to ensuring that Ohio's educational institutions remain spaces of intellectual freedom, innovation, and respect for all students and faculty. Senate Bill 1, as currently drafted, will damage the integrity of our public universities, diminish academic freedom, and undermine the values that make higher education a vital part of society. It is my sincere hope that you will reconsider the provisions in this bill and instead focus on policies that support educators, promote diversity of thought, and protect the rights of all students.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I urge you to oppose Senate Bill 1.

Sincerely,
Robert Bognar
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Art Educator