

**Testimony of Sarah Neville
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair**

February 10, 2025

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

My name is Sarah Neville and I am a professor of English and Theatre at the Ohio State University where I have taught for 11 years. I do not represent OSU but rather am submitting testimony as a private constituent in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I am concerned about a number of elements in this bill, which strike me as being unnecessary (they attempt to solve a non-existent problem); as being ill-advised (they will undermine Ohio education and hinder Ohio's ability to compete nationally and internationally); and as having an unfunded mandate that will lead to tuition increases, making community college and university more difficult for Ohioans to access.

Course Syllabi Requirements

SB1 requires that all university and community college syllabi be posted on a publicly accessible website that must be accessible from the main page within three clicks and demands that an administrator be designated to implement these responsibilities. This requirement is unnecessary – enrolled students in university classes throughout the state are already able to access the syllabi on the first day of class, because professors provide them to enable students to study. Syllabi are not complete records of course planning – they are road maps that get students from A to B, not topographical maps that outline everything that will be seen along the journey – and those who read syllabi will not have an adequate sense of what goes on in a classroom simply from the titles of the course readings. Because texts are subjects for learning and interrogation, those texts listed on a syllabus cannot and should not be understood to be endorsements by a professor. Indeed, there are many works I teach simply to help students track the evolution of an argument, or how to construct one. Without the context of the in-classroom discussion and activities (which syllabi do not list), outsiders may be confused as to the purpose and goals of a course.

This syllabus reporting requirement also has a considerable unfunded mandate that leads to unnecessary bureaucracy. As a large, research-intensive university that is one of the economic powerhouses of the state of Ohio, Ohio State University is very, very large, and such a requirement places an undue burden due to the scale of the institution. OSU offers more than 12,000 different courses in its catalog, serving over 60,000 students – multiple administrators would need to be hired to comply with this policy, which would have to be renewed each semester as courses shift depending on programmatic needs and student interests. The overhead costs for administering such a site are considerable. Institutions would have no choice but to pass these costs on to students in the form of tuition increases. What is more striking is that this policy is utterly unnecessary, as courses are regularly audited by the institution anyway. SB1's syllabus policy attempts to solve a problem that does not exist.

Controversial Beliefs or Policies

I am also concerned about the slippery slope of SB1's policy about teaching subjects of "political controversy." Scholars, who make a living producing knowledge, know that ALL topics are

potentially "controversial." The looseness of this term as presented in SB 1 is too far reaching and at its core undermines even basic elements of education, from the essentials of reading and writing, to the structure of analytical thought, to the very makeup of the universe (which itself is subject to considerable debate). University and college instructors enable students to "see the controversy" – showcasing how the circumstances of the present day were determined by the texts, actions, and interpretations of the past. Learning, like exercise, is not always comfortable – the philosopher Socrates noted that long ago when he identified teachers as both "midwives and gadflies" – but my colleagues and I give students opportunities to facilitate learning by showing students how they can investigate and how they can develop arguments to support their beliefs.

But SB1's notion of what constitutes "controversial" topics is simply unworkable. As a historian of the English Reformation, my own research expertise confirms that even seemingly innocuous topics like plant description can become riled within larger political, cultural, and social arguments. And such social distinctions emerge even more clearly in literature and art. For example, Shakespeare's famous comedy *As You Like It* ends, like so many of his comedies, with marriage – but the way the play was first printed in 1623, and the nature of the play itself, suggests that the comedy concludes with a same-sex marriage, not a heterosexual one. Teaching *As You Like It* responsibly, with historical accuracy, therefore requires students to wrestle with the nature of marriage and the nature of sexuality in the English Renaissance. This is not an isolated incident - Shakespeare's plays about religion and politics likewise make demands that students discuss such matters in the classroom and defend their perspectives rigorously, with attention to the text, the moment it was written, and the uses to which that text has since been put. Teachers need to be able to confront these matters and assess students' abilities to articulate them, but as written, SB1 is so broad as to interfere with the teaching of Shakespeare.

I urge you to vote NO on this unnecessary, expensive, and harmful bill.