

Testimony of Nichole Michaels, PhD
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 11, 2025

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

My name is Nichole Michaels, and I am an assistant professor of Pediatrics at The Ohio State University College of Medicine. I am not representing my employers, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen in strong opposition to Senate Bill 1.

I grew up in a small town in Northeast Ohio and have lived in Ohio for much of my life. I earned both my master's degree and PhD in public health from The Ohio State University. I'm proud of the university education I received in this state, and grateful to have had the opportunity to learn in an environment where I was exposed to diverse people and ideas that were very different than those I grew up with.

Public health is the foundation of the nation's well-being, encompassing everything from clean water to preventing injuries and chronic diseases. Public health is full of topics that have been made to seem "controversial" in today's partisan political climate. Under the vague and ominous language of SB 1, faculty will be forced to walk on eggshells when discussing "any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy" or avoid these topics altogether, lest they be subjected to disciplinary action or even termination. Such an environment would be deeply detrimental to student learning.

SB 1's "intellectual diversity" mandate is also problematic in its requirement that students be encouraged to reach their own conclusions about controversial subjects. While I think most people would agree that we want students to learn to be critical thinkers, the language of the bill essentially indicates that "there are no wrong answers." This legislation would set educators up for a grading nightmare with potential legal ramifications for universities.

As one example, it is widely understood in the field of public health that the Tuskegee Syphilis Study that began in the 1930s and continued for 40 years was an unethical and abhorrent demonstration of exploitation against poor Black men that still impacts the field of medical research to this day. In order to understand the history of public health and ensure that current and future research study participants are protected, it is essential that students learn about the harm that this study caused and the ethical principles it violated. Is it an uncomfortable topic to learn about? Certainly. But it's also a well-documented part of our nation's history. However, under SB 1 it's unclear how professors would be expected to respond to a student who, for example, indicates on an exam that the Tuskegee Syphilis Study was a positive contribution to science or cites racist ideology as a reason the study should have been allowed to continue.

SB 1 would negatively impact faculty and students alike by censoring class discussions, creating an environment of distrust, eroding student-faculty relationships, and impeding peer learning.

Recruitment of students and faculty will also become more difficult under the mandates described in SB 1. Sadly, many young adults who grow up in this state are already eager to relocate upon graduation. SB 1 will only exacerbate this trend. And how will we recruit new teaching and research faculty in an environment that is openly hostile to university educators, with state legislators who keep attempting, time and again, to dismantle our collective bargaining rights and trample our academic freedoms?

As evidenced by Senator Cirino's media interviews in recent days, in which he accuses Ohio's universities of "indoctrinating" students into "woke ideology," SB 1 is based on a negative and politically biased distortion of the educational environments of Ohio's highly regarded colleges and universities. As with the recently implemented SB 117 and its mandate to install so called "centers of intellectual diversity" on Ohio campuses, this bill represents gross political overreach based on conservative media talking points, rather than a good faith effort to improve Ohio's system of higher education.

I urge you to vote NO on Senate Bill 1.

Sincerely,

Nichole Michaels, PhD, MPH