

Chair Roegner, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Ingram, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee,

Thank you for allowing me to testify today. My name is Nikki Howard. I am a graduate of Wittenberg University, a current MFA student at Antioch University Los Angeles, and Springfield, Ohio resident. I am strongly opposed to SB 1 and its companion bill HB 6.

This Bill will have devastating consequences for low-income students. For most of my childhood and adolescence, I was homeless following a house fire on Easter Sunday in 2012. Following this tragedy and as the opioid epidemic swelled, each member of my family fell into heroin addiction. While we eventually bought a small trailer, addiction further devastated my family. Soon after, my mother died, the homelessness returned, and I was left to stay with friends and strangers to finish my early education. Throughout my entire life, no matter my personal troubles, I have always dedicated myself to educational pursuits. I have always believed I belong in the room where it happens. The malice interwoven in my early experiences does not get to decide my future.

All of this is to say, effort does not guarantee success. I can do all the right things. I can have all the right talent. I can have all the ambition in the world, but it can circle the drain if fortune deems it so. There are simply other variables keeping us from reaching our full potential, even when we have all the right tools. This bill will reduce access to higher education and further diminish the few tools available to low-income students.

Through its shifting funding models and its potential to increase student debt, the bill will make it even more difficult for low-income students to afford higher education. This will amplify existing inequalities and limit opportunities for upward mobility as higher education is one of our primary means of escaping poverty.

The dissolution of these DEI programs and departments will result in diminished support for low-income students who often face unique barriers in higher education. Homelessness and poverty never existed in the background of my education but rather weaved itself into every fiber. Homelessness did not end when I reached university as I could not afford to live on campus, but the endless support from my university faculty, the mental health resources of our campus accessibility center, and the emergency housing provided by the campus residency center were just some of the ways DEI turned me into a college graduate. Without these programs, without unwavering community support, my socioeconomic background would have negatively impacted my academic performance, mental health, and overall college experience.

This bill also limits academic freedom through its restrictions on curriculum. With these restrictions, low-income students who typically come from isolated backgrounds will have a limited exposure to diverse perspectives. This will greatly impact their critical thinking skills and hinder their ability to engage in informed decision making when participating in a democratic society. This bill dismantles the quality of the education students receive as changes to university funding and faculty working conditions result in a reduced number of faculty and resources

available to provide to marginalized communities. Low-income students who already face disparities in educational resources will most certainly be affected by these changes.

In high school, my guidance counselor once told me, “You can’t go to college. You don’t have the resources.” Now, the homeless girl has a degree. But, she was right. I didn’t have the resources. It was hard and I had to put myself through additional trauma just to afford the luxury of barely scraping by. My guidance counselor never told me of my limitations to be malicious, but rather to be realistic. It is the fortunate chance that I happen to be quite delusional. I knew I probably wouldn’t succeed, but outliers, those miracles others spend their Sundays reeling over, happen. If they didn’t, God would have little business. DEI programs are that miracle for students in poverty.

There are students like me taking every chance imaginable on themselves. There are students like me who have relied heavily on governmental support to make their aspirations achievable. I’m delusional enough to believe I deserve to be here, no matter what it costs me, and I will work tirelessly to increase my odds of success. I was homeless, raised by addicts, and suffered from severe malnutrition from the ages 12 to 18. I remember having to melt snow in the winter just to wash my hair and it was still a privilege for me to acquire a literary degree, but I am tired of education being a privilege. I want the children after me to have an easier time, not a harder one. Some of us need options to even out the odds.

I believe education is a privilege and we must take our privileges as a chance to educate ourselves so that we can educate others at a more affordable rate. To me, having the opportunity to receive a quality education means you now have a civic duty to pass on that knowledge to those who couldn't afford the same opportunities. Education is not a pathway to superiority; it is a journey towards empathy and civic engagement.

Mary Hays via Mr. Francis said it best:

"When the minds of men are changed, the system of things will also change...Let us remember, that vice originates in mistakes of understanding, and that, he who seeks happiness by means contradictory and destructive, is emphatically the sinner. Our duties, then, are obvious—If selfish and violent passions have been generated by the inequalities of society, we must labour to counteract them, by endeavoring to combat prejudice, to expand the mind, to give comprehensive views, to teach mankind their true interest, and to lead them to habits of goodness and greatness...Let it, then, be your noblest ambition to co-operate with, to join your efforts, to those of philosophers and sages, the benefactors of mankind...everyone in his sphere may do something; each has a little circle where his influence will be availing." (Memoirs of Emma Courtney by Mary Hays)

This is why I fought so hard for my education, and this is me using it now to urge you to continue supporting DEI programs in higher education. I beg you today to support our most vulnerable students. They deserve options. In a world where literacy rates are low,

encouragement and accessibility are our greatest tools. Do not weaponize education for your own egocentric objectives. Education is a selfless communal endeavor to enrich the way we understand, interact, and positively influence the institutions around us.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote **NO** on this devastating and destructive bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify,

Nikki Howard
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