

Testimony of Angela Adkins, Ph.D.
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 Angela Adkins, and I am a Professor of Sociology at Stark State College, where I have taught for 15 years. I do not represent Stark State, but rather I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1 (SB1).

I am a sociologist, an award-winning educator, and a proud community college professor in Ohio where I have dedicated my entire career to teaching and supporting students. SB1 concerns me deeply as big government overreach that will be detrimental to our students, our institutions, and the broader Ohio community. Mandating the elimination of DEI programs, forbidding training related to DEI, declaring an ill-defined list of controversial topics to be constrained, and threatening to withhold state funding from institutions that do not comply is not merely an attempt to *prevent* ideological indoctrination—it is an effort to *mandate* ideological conformity to a narrow, exclusionary worldview.

Community colleges like mine serve a student population that includes many from marginalized social groups—first-generation students, low-income students, immigrants, students from rural areas, students of color, LGBTQ+ students, and students with disabilities. These students benefit from an education that prioritizes critical thinking, exposure to diverse ideas that don't always echo their own previously held worldviews or the government's agenda, and support programs that focus on inclusion and equity. By eliminating these programs and restricting discussion of important social issues, SB1 directly harms those who rely on them most, making higher education less accessible and less equitable.

As a faculty member, my role is to expose students to a broad range of perspectives and to equip them with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate a complex world. I do not have time to push an ideological agenda; I am far too busy teaching, mentoring, and ensuring my students have access to essential resources such as housing, childcare, aid, and tutoring. If SB1 passes, the resources that both my students and I depend on to foster their success will disappear. If these initiatives are eliminated, what alternative safety nets will be put in place for students? The likely answer is that there will be none.

Moreover, it is unclear exactly how I am supposed to effectively teach a course such as Diversity in American Society while complying with SB1's restrictions. The state previously approved this course to explore the realities of systemic inequality and cover topics such as racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. If I am unable to present data, engage students in meaningful discussions, and critically examine such social issues without fear of punitive

action against myself or my institution for not steering clear of “controversial” topics, then I cannot fulfill my responsibilities as an educator and an employee. This bill directly undermines my ability to meet the learning objectives that the state itself has established.

Students, faculty, and higher education administrators have made their opposition to this bill clear, as they did with its predecessor SB83. Yet, supporters of SB1 continue to push forward under the false pretense of protecting intellectual diversity and preventing the “indoctrination” of students. In reality, this bill mandates a specific ideology by forcing institutions to entertain all perspectives, even those that have been roundly discredited. There is no legitimate “other side” to white supremacy or to misogyny. There is no sincere scientific debate over climate change or evolution. And yet, under SB1, faculty would be forced to present these issues as though all viewpoints hold equal weight and merit. That is not academic freedom or intellectual diversity—it is an intellectual straightjacket designed to suppress the very purpose of higher education.

The ambiguity in SB1’s vague definition of what constitutes the teaching of “controversial beliefs” in the classroom will undoubtedly create a chilling effect on individual speech, discouraging faculty from engaging in open discourse on critical social issues out of fear of political retribution. Academic institutions should be places where evidence-based discussion flourishes, not environments where experts must second-guess whether their research or lectures will be deemed politically controversial by legislators with no background in teaching or higher education. The reality is that higher education does not dictate what students should think; it empowers them to think for themselves. That is precisely why so many students, faculty, and institutions oppose SB1: it will undermine the very foundation of learning.

Ohio’s universities and community colleges are diverse institutions with unique needs and challenges. They do not need a one-size-fits-all ideological mandate crafted by a small group of legislators and un-elected bureaucrats dictating how institutions should evaluate faculty, award tenure, facilitate inclusion and equity, or approach controversial topics in the classroom. Those decisions should be left to educators and administrators who understand the complexities of higher education—not to politicians weaponizing culture war politics for their own gain.

I believe Ohio deserves a higher education system that prepares students for an increasingly diverse and interconnected world. SB1 will do the opposite. It will stifle intellectual exploration, weaken student support systems, and make Ohio’s colleges less competitive in an era where inclusivity and critical thinking are more important than ever. To paraphrase the late Carl Sagan, this is a time in our state and national history when we need to be able to discern between what feels good and what is true, lest we “slide back into superstition and darkness.”

Please listen to the voices of those who will be most affected by this bill: the students and educators who live these realities every day. Reject SB1. Instead, invest in robust policies that truly support higher education rather than dismantling it in the service of a political agenda.