

Testimony of Katherine (Katie) Conner, MA
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 Katie Conner, and I am a PhD student in Linguistics at the Ohio State University, where I have attended as a doctoral graduate student since August of 2018. I do not represent Ohio State, but rather am submitting testimony as a private citizen and current student in the state of Ohio in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

Simply put, I'm submitting written testimony today in opposition of SB1, the "Enact Advance Ohio Higher Education Act" because students, faculty, staff, and the citizens of Ohio deserve better. The Ohio State University is a flagship land-grant institution and world-leader in research, education, and service due in large part to the current and enduring intellectual diversity of its community members, and the breadth and depth of experiences and expertise we all bring as we endeavor to create and share knowledge to not only improve our own lives, but more broadly our fellow man.

Though SB1 broadly purports to enshrine intellectual diversity and academic freedom into law, and claims to protect the interests of students and our institutions of higher education, when reading the actual text of this proposed legislation it becomes glaringly evident that this is yet another attempt at the authors and sponsors of the bill to insert themselves and their own ideologies and beliefs into education in Ohio in a transparent bid to control the content of our classes, the conversations we engage in, and the research we pursue. While the bill itself and news coverage of proponent and sponsor viewpoints claims that this will protect students and education in Ohio, in reading the current text it seems that they have failed to actually seek out and consider the input of the populations that would be most directly impacted by the rules, controls, and regulations placed on education, if this bill is voted into law. They have seemingly instead chosen to cherry-pick a few viewpoints that support their own, eschewing the broader majority's concerns and questions about the actual goals, implementation, and downstream impacts of such aggressive and anti-intellectual legislation.

I myself came to Ohio State to be challenged by alternate viewpoints and difficult conversations, not coddled and shielded from them. My program is number seven in

the United States and number eleven in the world in my field (Linguistics). This is due in large part to the tradition of our department membership's eagerness to engage with complex topics, boundary-pushing research, and to deal with discomfort and at times unpopular or controversial topics. I have taken courses where I have been challenged to defend my viewpoints, academic or personal by professors or classmates. However, this hasn't been in pursuit of belittling me, or of silencing me, but rather to help me develop my skills as a researcher and scholar. I have learned to better articulate my points over time, to engage and challenge others in ways that are rigorous and well-informed, while also being compassionate, welcoming, and professional. If I were applying to graduate school or postdoctoral positions next year, and SB1 was the law in Ohio, I would not consider programs or positions within the state. SB1's narrow regulation of academic freedom and direct conflict with widely-accepted best practices and accreditation standards would make me look elsewhere. This bill lessens the rigor of our coursework, reduces the status of our academic programs and degrees, and puts many of our world-class programs at risk by outlawing coursework, concepts, and practices that are required in a number of fields across a variety of disciplines.

I have taken this embrace of challenging but productive conversations into my own teaching as well as my research. I have regularly taught coursework that has dealt with some of the controversial topics that SB1 seeks to regulate, control, or outright ban; gender, race, class, and other social identities, alongside theoretical conceptualizations of these "institutions" and additionally power, discrimination, bias, and more. One of the greatest pleasures I have in my classes is giving students the tools to think critically for themselves. We discuss how to evaluate academic and non-academic literature for its credibility, merits, and where it could be improved. We talk about how to search for multiple sources on topics, to identify different types of evidence, and how to work through and square conflicting viewpoints with our own beliefs and experiences. We work to cultivate a space together where we can disagree productively, grow through tension, and all move forward with more nuanced viewpoints and better-developed arguments than we began the semester with. I am regularly struck by students throughout the semester and at its conclusion reflecting on how the class pushed them academically and personally. Sometimes their opinions change throughout the courses I teach, and sometimes they don't. I am happy in both cases, as these students have worked hard to evaluate for themselves how and why they come to believe the things they do, and to view the world through their experiences and articulate those experiences to others so that they are understood. I love being challenged by students' disagreements with me. It keeps me on my toes, improves my teaching practice, gives me new viewpoints to consider as I continue teaching and researching, and has helped motivate some of my current research. Students want to be challenged. They want to learn. They want to take

what they learn beyond OSU to improve the world, solve problems, and live out “Disciplina in Civitatem” (Education for Citizenship) in their lives. They want the tools and strategies to be able to make their own decisions and to seek out information to inform their worldviews. I literally cannot imagine the reaction of a student if I were to tell them I couldn’t respond to an honest question because I would be violating the law by sharing empirically-backed work with them that comes from a controversial school of thoughts, or to tell them that I can’t clarify further on a topic because the legislature has outlawed its detailed discussion in my classroom due to specific content restraints. I will point out here that this law is creating the very intellectual and academic restrictions that it is claiming to “protect” or “remove”.

These challenges, these foundational experiences, and these connections that students, faculty, and staff seek out in higher education across Ohio will evaporate overnight if SB1 is adopted into law. It is insulting, belittling, and damaging to all those employed in or seeking higher education in the state of Ohio to approve this bill. It will hobble our institutions of higher education, it will drive talent and expertise away from the state of Ohio (both by discouraging out-of-state recruitment, and encouraging in-state talent to leave to seek more welcoming and open environments), and demonstrate that Ohio is another “Florida” or “Texas”, that is to say, a laughing stock and regular target of insults and jokes on the international and national stage when it comes to our educational goals and practices. Please allow students to be the authors of their own academic destinies. Please allow instructors to craft their curricula in accordance with best practices and academic rigor. Please allow us all to continue to grow the reputation of our state and our schools as destinations for those who wish to push boundaries, save lives, positively impact communities, and develop tomorrow’s leaders as a community.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony. I hope that you all vote in the best interests of your constituents based on their own testimony and expressed needs, and not simply in the way you personally and individually have decided is “best” for us.