

February 11, 2025

American Historical Association Testimony in Opposition to SB 1

Presented to the Ohio Senate Higher Education Committee

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

The American Historical Association registers strong concern about Ohio Senate Bill 1, currently before this committee. During last year's legislative cycle, the AHA wrote two separate letters to Ohio legislators expressing concerns about the new mechanisms previous versions of this proposed legislation—then, SB 83—would create to overrule the professional judgment and academic expertise of faculty and departments.

The same unwise provisions are included in SB 1, and our previous objections still apply.

The AHA applauds many of the bill's stated goals: free inquiry, true intellectual diversity, and vigorous debate. Classrooms are and must remain spaces where students can experiment with new ideas while learning to value curiosity, analytical thinking, and academic integrity. We have grave doubts, however, about the utility of SB 1's heavy-handed interventions in both history education and university administration.

Our concerns focus on several troubling elements of SB 1, including the following clauses in the bill:

- Defining “intellectual diversity” in a manner that **undercuts the free exchange of ideas**. The bill's definition establishes a standard for evaluating both students and faculty on the degree to which they display “multiple, divergent, and varied perspectives on an extensive range of public policy issues,” especially those that are the “subject of political controversy.” History students and faculty should be evaluated on the quality of their work and not where they stand on unrelated matters of public policy.
- Authorizing boards of regents and state officials to **overrule professional judgment**, to reject the “consensus or foundational beliefs of an academic discipline,” and to censure or terminate faculty (regardless of tenure) if they deem them to have violated vague standards of “intellectual diversity.” Ohio's world-class public colleges and universities should not be forced to promote widely discredited theories or ignore the preponderance of available evidence to create space for certain ideas just because doing so is politically expedient.

- Requiring public colleges and universities to **investigate complaints about what students say and do** in the classroom and on campus. This would make students less likely to share potentially controversial ideas and interpretations, hindering the free exchange of ideas.
- Mandating colleges to post detailed course syllabi, including class schedules, on public-facing websites with keyword searches to **facilitate public surveillance**.
- Establishing **overly prescriptive requirements**—including 11 required texts and a cumulative final exam—for a new “American civic literacy” course, mandatory for graduation from any public college or university.

SB 1 is especially alarming in its implications for history and historians. We have serious concerns about the exclusion of historical context from the required civic literacy course, as well as the rationale behind the unusual specificity with which the legislation spells out the content and structure of this course.

Faculty at Ohio’s world-class public colleges and universities already teach foundational texts in an array of courses. But many universities opt to divide US history into a two-course sequence, enabling faculty to devote adequate time and attention to the significance of transformational texts, as well as the richly layered context in which they were produced. SB 1 takes fundamental decisions about the content and structure of a core general education course out of the hands of qualified faculty and departments, forcing educators to prioritize the wishes of the state legislature over the needs and interests of our students. Furthermore, SB 1 adds three mandatory credit hours to student degree plans that will likely slow students in their progress toward graduation. This requirement might do more to boost the rate of failure in general education courses than to improve the civic and historical awareness of Ohio’s public university students. There are far more productive ways for policymakers and university administrators to encourage student learning in history and civics.

With more than 10,500 members, the AHA is the largest membership association of professional historians in the world. Founded in 1884 and incorporated by Congress in 1889 for the promotion of historical studies, the Association provides leadership for the discipline, helps to sustain and enhance the work of historians, and promotes the imperative of historical thinking in public life.

Everything has a history. If passed, SB 1 would undermine the quality of public higher education in Ohio.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Grossman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent initial "J" and "G".

James Grossman
Executive Director