

Testimony of Jessica A. Leveto, Ph.D.

February 10, 2025

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

I am a first-generation college graduate from rural Northwest Pennsylvania, where I experienced the transformative power of education as a pathway to upward mobility. I hold a PhD in Sociology from Kent State University and am now a tenured Associate Professor at Kent State University at Ashtabula.

Most of my students are also first-generation college students, many from rural areas in Northeast Ohio. They are eager to explore the world beyond their immediate experiences. For 15 years, I have committed my career to fostering a classroom environment where all students feel safe and supported as they learn to navigate social structures and their roles as individuals in institutions, workplaces, families, and the broader world.

I write today to strongly oppose Senate Bill 1 because it is an attack on academic freedom, student success, and the ability of higher education to prepare students for a diverse and globalized world. More than that, SB 1 is a direct promotion of white supremacy—it protects dominant narratives while silencing marginalized voices and erasing the lived experiences of people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other historically excluded groups.

Education didn't just give me a degree; it helped me understand my place in a broader world, value different perspectives, and empower me to build a life beyond what I could have ever imagined was possible.

I didn't do it alone. I succeeded because I had professors and mentors who helped me navigate a system that wasn't built for students like me—first generation, windowed young mother, rural, working-class. I had faculty who believed that **my background wasn't a barrier but an asset**. I had **access** to learning spaces where I was encouraged to **think critically about power, privilege, and social systems**.

Today, I strive to provide my students access, belonging, and inclusion. For over two decades, I have attended hundreds of hours of training and seminars, read countless books, conducted research, published articles, and participated in multiple DEI initiatives—all to ensure that I can best serve all my students. I recognize that they come from different experiences and that understanding those differences is paramount to their success.

SB 1 threatens to erase this work, stripping students of opportunities to learn in an environment that recognizes and values who they are and where they come from. Worse, it forces faculty like me into an impossible position: ***Do I share the empirical truths about systemic inequality with my students, or do I censor myself out of fear that I will be punished for doing my job?***

We live in a globalized world where understanding diversity is not just important but necessary for success. Employers want graduates who can navigate cultural differences, engage in critical thinking, and work with people from different backgrounds. If Ohio's universities cannot provide students with these skills, they will graduate unprepared for the modern workforce, and our state's economy will suffer.

Moreover, this bill will drive faculty out of Ohio—educators like me, who have spent decades developing expertise in equity and inclusion to serve all students, will be forced to leave for institutions that value academic freedom. Ohio will lose talented educators, and students will suffer.

SB 1 is not about neutrality. It is about maintaining power structures that have always privileged white, male, straight, cisgender, and wealthy individuals at the expense of others. By banning DEI and restricting discussions about systemic oppression, **this bill actively reinforces white supremacy** in the following ways:

- It sanitizes history to protect white comfort.
- Erasing discussions about racism, immigration, and systemic inequality does not make these realities disappear—it simply prevents students from understanding the full story of American history.
- By restricting conversations on racial disparities, SB 1 ensures that students learn history from a single, dominant (white) perspective, which minimizes the struggles and achievements of marginalized communities.
- It reinforces the false narrative that diversity and inclusion are weaknesses rather than strengths.
- SB 1 suggests that teaching about race, gender, and systemic inequality is "controversial" while simultaneously forcing "both sides" of debates that deny the existence of racism, homophobia, and xenophobia.
- This type of false equivalency tells students that white supremacy, misogyny, and discrimination are just "opinions" rather than oppressive systems with real consequences.
- It re-establishes a hierarchy where people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and historically underrepresented groups are silenced.
- Eliminating DEI programs and requiring "intellectual diversity" in ways that force educators to platform racist, sexist, and homophobic viewpoints, SB 1 actively relegates some groups of people to second-class status in higher education.
- It tells students of color that their lived experiences are debatable. It forces them to sit through lessons where their identity and struggles are framed as a political controversy rather than a lived reality.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this dangerous, regressive bill.

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