

Chairwoman 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 Rebecca Mason Vergote. I am an Assistant Professor of Teaching in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at Ohio State and I have spent my entire professional career working in higher education with a focus on language education. I am strongly opposed to SB1. At its core is the unfounded claim that university professors seek to indoctrinate their students into espousing extreme, leftist politics through biased readings, heavy-handed inclusion of personal beliefs, ostracization and grade-based pressure and seeks to remedy this fictional problem by overregulating and micromanaging the work of field experts in higher education. Ohio has long been exemplary in the opportunities for higher education within our state, but this bill will hogtie those of us who know that academic freedom is paramount to our common goal of producing graduates who have the knowledge and preparation to contribute to local, state, national and global economies.

In early 2017, I first heard the words “alternative facts” in a press interview and I knew in that moment that my job as an educator would become much more complicated. I was right. While I want my classroom to be an open, respectful space where students feel comfortable sharing differing views on myriad issues, SB1 rests upon the notion that truth is subjective, and therefore that students and citizens in general might, based on their values and beliefs, challenge the expert-informed decisions made in course design and lesson planning. Furthermore, its language opens the door to harmful rhetoric, such as the suggestion made by Jerry Cirino, that different sides on topics such as the Holocaust must be “welcomed to be discussed”. It is true that World War II was a complex conflict involving many countries and interests but suggesting that there are alternative versions to atrocities such as genocides, slavery and objective oppression brings an element of dangerous fiction into institutions of higher education, where truth is the highest objective. Moreover, the ability to carefully mediate necessary conversations on “controversial topics” is one that is developed over years of training and practice. It cannot be dictated by lawmakers who have little classroom experience.

Indoctrinating students would be wholly antithetical to my pedagogical values. While we do address “controversial topics” in language classes, I, like every colleague I have ever known, strive to strike a balance between neutrality and humanity, so that students learn to distinguish the many shades of gray between black and white. This may entail bringing in factual information that can feel uncomfortable to some. For example, my students might consider the well-documented role that the US has played in the complex conflicts that ultimately lead individuals from certain countries to immigrate. And, while I would never share with my students my personal views on immigration, I certainly convey my human empathy for the plight of those who view immigration, legal or not, to be the only means to their survival and well-being, because I hope to serve as an example of informed and compassionate humanity. This is neither indoctrination nor bias—the accepted definition of which includes: an inclination of temperament or outlook, *especially* a personal, sometimes unreasoned judgment or prejudice. However, given the language of SB1, it might be perceived as such. Passing legislation that forces professors,

experts in their field, to accept falsehoods—disproven scientific myths, historic falsehoods or selective rewritings of documented events—under the guise of “unbiased teaching” opens the door to the demise of our historically strong education system.

Finally, the demands placed on institutions of higher education will be costly and cumbersome, requiring additional administrative work to ensure compliance with syllabi requirements, statements of commitment, and other unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles at a time when university budgets are being scrutinized and slashed in unprecedented ways. This bill not only threatens the academic freedom that is integral to the pursuit of knowledge by creating space for unfounded complaints against professors and instructors, but it will also place undue burden on universities by forcing them to meet arbitrary, meddling requirements that do nothing to improve the quality of students’ learning experiences.

I ask you to consider my testimony and vote NO on this harmful bill. Thank you again for the opportunity to testify.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rebecca M. Mason Vergote". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and "M".

Rebecca M. Mason Vergote