

Testimony Opposing Ohio Senate Bill 1: The Advance Ohio Higher Education Act

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

My name is Ainslee Johnson-Brown, and I serve as the Ohio Policy and Movement Building Director at the Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity (URGE). We advocate for policies that promote academic freedom and inclusive campus environments for our members. On behalf of the young Ohioans from Cincinnati to Toledo to Cleveland and in between, I submit this testimony in opposition to Senate Bill 1 (SB1) and its companion, House Bill 6 (HB6).

This legislation poses an insurmountable threat to academic freedom in Ohio's public universities by placing political restrictions on curricula, faculty governance, and student-led initiatives. Higher education thrives when students and faculty explore, debate, and research issues without mandate. Sponsor testimony for SB1 emphasizes the importance of "diversity of thought", yet the legislation requires the removal of all mentions of "diversity" from the academic curricula. This bill would erode those freedoms by allowing the state to dictate what can and cannot be taught, placing Ohio's institutions on a dangerous path of censorship and intellectual suppression. Such interference undermines universities' role as spaces of critical thinking, where students learn to engage with complex ideas.

While the sponsor for SB1 expressed an intent to advance the economy in Ohio, implementing this bill will severely hinder the long-term economic contributions of Ohio's college students. Industries such as healthcare, law, social services, and business rely on professionals who can analyze complex social and economic factors. The constraints that SB1 places on higher education curricula will force students to graduate with gaps in their understanding of key issues that impact the workforce. If Ohio's universities become less attractive to prospective students due to academic restrictions, fewer high-achieving students may enroll, and more graduates may seek employment in states with broader academic freedom, reducing Ohio's skilled workforce.

Senate Bill 1 represents a regressive and dangerous step backward for Ohio's public higher education system. Instead of fostering free inquiry and intellectual diversity, this bill enforces state-mandated censorship, harms marginalized communities, and strips universities of the ability to create inclusive environments. URGE strongly urges this committee to reject SB 1 and instead focus on policies that uplift all students, protect academic freedom, and ensure equitable access to education and healthcare.

Ainslee Johnson-Brown

Phone: (202) 965-7700
Fax: (202) 965-7701
Toll Free: (888) 784-4494

1012 14th Street NW ★ Suite 305
Washington, DC 20005

Alabama ★ California ★ Georgia
Kansas ★ Ohio ★ Texas

 www.URGE.org
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Ohio Policy and Movement Building Director
Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity