

Testimony to the Ohio Senate Higher Education Committee -February 11, 2025

Members of the Higher Education Committee,

I stand in opposition to Senate Bill 1, which proposes sweeping administrative reforms for Ohio's public universities, community colleges, and technical colleges. Its sponsors claim that the bill will expand free speech and promote "intellectual diversity." But make no mistake—this bill does nothing of the sort. Instead, it threatens to dismantle the very principles of free expression it pretends to protect.

Expanding intellectual diversity? Let's be honest about what Senate Bill 1 truly does: it bans "any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy," encompassing vital issues such as climate policy, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, and abortion. These are critical topics for public discourse and intellectual exploration. How are we supposed to engage with these complex issues if we can no longer even discuss them in our state universities? Far from promoting "intellectual diversity," this bill functions more like a gag order—a direct assault on free speech and academic freedom, both of which are fundamental to higher education and enshrined in the First Amendment.

How would this gag order be enforced? By requiring institutions to investigate and respond to complaints from any student, student group, or faculty member who claims a violation of these vague prohibitions. This policy harkens back to the McCarthy-era witch hunts, when self-appointed watchdogs targeted citizens as communist sympathizers. Today, it's academics who find themselves in the crosshairs—professors accused of indoctrinating students with "dangerous ideas."

What kind of intellectual diversity are the sponsors of SB 1 trying to achieve by silencing faculty and stifling free inquiry? The bill doesn't encourage open debate or multiple perspectives. Instead, it weaponizes administrative processes to suppress viewpoints that certain individuals find objectionable. This is not intellectual freedom. It's censorship dressed up as reform.

Make no mistake—Senate Bill 1 is part of a broader culture war that uses education as a political battleground, stoking fear and silencing dissent. Ohio's students and educators deserve better than to be pawns in this cynical game. We owe it to them—and to the future of higher education in Ohio—to reject this attack on free thought and intellectual inquiry. Let's call this bill what it truly is: a dangerous overreach from lawmakers that undermines the very foundation of learning.

Thank you.

Jay Zenitsky