

Testimony of Joel Wainwright, PhD  
before the Senate Higher Education Committee  
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair  
Written 10 February 2025 for session on 11 February 2025

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

1. My name is Joel Wainwright. I am a Professor of Geography at Ohio State University where I have taught for 19 years.
2. I do not represent Ohio State University. I submit this testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1 (hereafter SB1).
3. I oppose SB1 for many reasons, but given time constraints, I will only emphasize one element.
4. SB1 would make it extremely difficult for me to do my job as a teacher because of its vague language concerning the teaching of “controversial topics”, viz: “any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies... foreign policy”, and so on.
5. I was hired at Ohio State to teach courses about climate policies and foreign policy, among other things. I am proud to say that I have done my job well, as measured by the standard metrics (teaching awards, Student Evaluation scores) and, more substantively, by student learning. The students who have taken my classes have consistently demonstrated an enhanced ability to read and write critically, evaluate evidence, formulate original hypotheses, and develop their ideas on these topics. Successful teaching and learning about politically-contentious topics like climate politics and US foreign policy requires the free play of thought, systematic exposure to marginal and even radical ideas, and the ability to test out uncertain hypotheses. To cite Immanuel Kant, the sole necessary condition for Enlightenment is the free, public use of reason on all points.

6. The passage of SB1 would remove these essential conditions. Its vague language about “controversial topics” is certain to chill free inquiry. SB1 would engender fear among teachers that, if we say something about a “controversial topic” in the classroom that offends one student, we will be subjected to political-bureaucratic inquiry; the predictable result will be the avoidance, for most teachers, of contentious topics. As a consequence, Ohio’s students will not receive a well-rounded education—one which *requires* studying “controversial ideas”, under the tutelage of committed and well-trained teachers. If we genuinely wish for students to reach their own conclusions, which requires developing student capacities to think critically, government must not intervene—as with SB1—into the classroom.
7. A final remark. SB1 includes language restricting engagements between universities in Ohio with institutions in China. I suspect that your fear of such engagements has much to do with your love of freedom and dislike of the repressive character of the Chinese state. As a scholar of political economy who has published several research papers on China<sup>1</sup> (and had the privilege of two opportunities to visit the country), I have serious misgivings about this section of the bill; but I raise it here only to remark that the repressive character of the Chinese state is nowhere more apparent than in the quiet, rather mundane, practices which repress the critical analysis of “controversial topics” in schools. The Chinese government does not need to ban topics outright nor carry out violence against teachers to silence dissenting views. It merely signals that certain topics are “controversial”; the teachers will get the message. If they do not, their peers—and sometimes, their students—ensure that teachers do not discuss them in the classroom.
8. There is, therefore, something odd about a bill that acts to separate Ohio’s universities from China, while, at the same time, adopting strategies that would be so familiar in that society.
9. In sum: I strenuously urge you to vote against SB1, which would only weaken Ohio’s public educational institutions and hurt the youth of this State.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Franklin, J., & Wainwright, J. (2024). Where does Xinjiang fit within the Belt and Road Initiative? Indications from CCP Documents and China’s Steel industry. *Critical Asian Studies* 56(3), 495-514; also, Carmody, P., & Wainwright, J. (2022). Contradiction and restructuring in the Belt and Road Initiative: reflections on China’s pause in the ‘Go world’. *Third World Quarterly* 43(12), 2830-2851.