

Testimony of Matthew deTar, Ph.D.
Before the Senate Higher Education Committee
Senator Kristina Roegner, Chair
February 10, 2025

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

My name is Matthew deTar, and I am a professor of Communication Studies at Ohio University, where I have taught for 8 years. I do not represent Ohio University, but rather I am submitting testimony as a private citizen in opposition to Senate Bill 1.

My testimony below addresses my experience in the classroom as well as my experience on college-wide committees. Both areas of experience give me reason to strongly oppose SB 1.

Classroom Experience

As a professor of Communication Studies at Ohio University, I know first-hand how SB 1 will hamper my students' ability to learn skills necessary for them to succeed in the workplace. Many OU students majoring in Communication Studies are interested in marketing, strategic communication, branding, and other aspects of organizational communication in private companies. SB 1 legislates the manner in which certain topics can be addressed and the way in which professors manage their classrooms. Successfully teaching students how organizations should respond to publicity crises or how advertisers can capitalize on popular culture trends are not one-size-fits-all topics. Students need to understand how to analyze numerous real-life situations and possible audience responses to be successful in their future careers in these areas. Legislative proscriptions would have an immediate chilling effect in classrooms and make it extremely difficult for faculty to train students in the skills that will make them successful in their careers after college. College education is too expensive to become an activity that does not lead to a successful career.

A primary skill I emphasize in my classes is understanding and analyzing differing and multiple audiences. Frequently, I ask students to read and analyze Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address in order to imagine differing audiences. This speech came near the end of the Civil War but before the war was over, and many white people in the Southern States did not vote in the election. In the speech, Lincoln attempts to welcome this group into the future Union with some of his most famous lines: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds." But Lincoln's "welcoming" message was heard very differently by the Southern audience, and many newspaper editorials in the South after Lincoln's speech talked about how he was blaming the South for the war and how he wanted to rain down God's vengeance on the South during and after the war. Teaching this famous historical speech requires students to imagine the perspective of both Northerners and Southerners and frequently raises the question of how Lincoln knows God's perspective. Understanding and analyzing differing and multiple audiences in this example requires

students to imagine the interests and perspectives of slave owners and also to question the framing of Lincoln's message, who he's trying to address and how.

I spend so much time on this example because, as a professor, SB 1 introduces vast uncertainty into how or whether I can use this simple and famous historical example that American citizens should know. I do not teach a class on Lincoln, I simply use this example over 1-2 days of class to help students identify audiences and think carefully about how to target and frame messages. This example addresses "political controversy" and "electoral politics," and students may interpret the example to address additional aspects of the "Controversial belief or policy" definition in SB 1, Sec. 3345.0217 (A) (1) such as "diversity" (the lack of semicolons in Sec. 3345.0217 (A) (1) makes "diversity" into a stand-alone category). However, SB 1, Sec. 3345.0217 (B) (4) states that faculty must "allow and encourage students to reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies." In the example of the Lincoln speech above, encouraging students to "reach their own conclusions" when they do not have historical background on this speech and have not done research on Southern newspapers defeats the purpose of the entire exercise. Students will not know that Southern editorialists criticized Lincoln, and I am not at all sure that SB 1 allows for me to teach students about the arguments of this historical "political controversy." This is one day of one class, and the Ohio legislature cannot be expected to advise faculty on this kind of minutia. Therefore, faculty will have to make decisions about what is legal to say in a classroom, which, for me, will include not teaching Lincoln's most famous speeches, and therefore reducing my ability to train students in marketable skills in analyzing audiences.

This example demonstrates the kind of broad uncertainty that will be produced by SB 1. The bill will hamper the efficacy of college instruction in Ohio and leave Ohio public university students at a disadvantage on the job market after college. The bill will make it nearly impossible for faculty to feel confident that their in-class examples align with the broad definitions in SB 1. The bill's vast overreach into the everyday minutia of classroom teaching and instructional materials will negatively impact students.

College Committee Experience

During the 2023-2024 academic year, I served on the Scripps College of Communication Inclusion Committee. The committee is not an admissions committee, and it awards small amounts of research travel funding, conference travel grants, and other research support to undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty in the Scripps College who are studying "diverse" topics. The committee does not fund projects based on an applicant's demographic categories but instead prioritizes research projects where students and faculty need to travel either internationally or outside of Athens. The committee has funded student travel to museums and archives in London, and it has supported graduate students traveling to the International Communication Association conference – the premier international conference for departments in the Scripps College of Communication. The committee ceased distributing funds based on directives from the Ohio Attorney General in Fall 2023, and the committee would cease to exist if SB 1 becomes law.

The text of SB 1 would likely lead to the cessation of all research funding that was previously administered by the Inclusion Committee. SB 1, Sec. 3345.0217 (B) (1) (a) (vi) states that

state institutions must “eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion requirements” for “any institutional scholarships.” Additionally, the next section of SB 1, Sec. 3345.0217 (B) (1) (a) (vii) states that “A state institution shall not replace [an existing office] designated for the purpose of diversity, equity, and inclusion with [a similar office] under a different designation that serves the same or similar purposes.” These combined provisions in the bill will in effect prohibit the Scripps College of Communication, an Ohio Board of Regents-designated Center for Excellence, from funding international travel for students and faculty. The Scripps College Inclusion Committee was a primary funding source for international research and international conference travel prior to SB 1, and the text of the bill prohibits replacing this Committee with a differently-titled Committee to serve a similar purpose. The loss of this funding will have severe detrimental consequences for the reputation of the faculty and students in the Scripps College. I cannot imagine that the Ohio legislature intends this kind of broad negative impact on its educational institutions. SB 1 will have unintended negative consequences on research and on Ohio’s international reputation.

Perhaps most confusing to me in SB 1, Sec. 3345.0217 (B) (1) (a) (vi), is the prohibition on private scholarships or other funding sources that have requirements regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. What makes a research university great, and in fact how universities are designated as “research universities” by the Carnegie Foundation, is partly related to the amount of external funding and grants a university brings in. SB 1, Sec. 3345.0217 (B) (1) (a) (vi) states that Ohio public universities must “not accept any additional funds for the operation of institutional scholarships that have diversity, equity, and inclusion requirements.” Prohibiting externally-funded scholarships from being accepted by Ohio public universities threatens the ranking and classification of Ohio’s public universities.

Conclusion

SB 1 contains at least 25 different issues areas, which would create an unprecedented number of unworkable mandates, most of which are simply more burdensome versions of what our colleges and universities already do. Giving administrators, faculty, and the chancellor more unfunded busywork takes away from student learning and adds to bureaucratic costs. None of this advances higher education. SB 1 will decrease the quality of individual classes, threaten the research status of Ohio’s public universities, and result in increased tuition to cover new bureaucracy. Ohio students will be less qualified for a job and have more debt.

There are real problems in higher education: increased tuition and debt, student retention and completion, and drastic reductions in academic programs and full-time faculty positions. SB 1 get at none of these pressing issues and will not add value to our colleges and universities.

Respectfully, I ask that you reject these bills, which could do real, irreversible damage to Ohio higher education. Please **VOTE NO ON SB 1!**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew deTar", written in a cursive style.

Matthew deTar