

# Ohio GOP lawmakers want to eliminate DEI, ban faculty strikes at public universities

By Jessie Balmert  
Cincinnati Enquirer

Ohio Republicans say higher education is broken. They want to fix it by eliminating diversity, equity and inclusion programs; prohibiting faculty from striking and firing poorly performing tenured professors.

Senate Bill 1, announced Wednesday, is a sweeping higher education package rising from the ashes of the contentious Senate Bill 83, which died at the end of the last two-year legislative session.

The new bill has many features of Senate Bill 83, which professors and students fought against for months. But it goes much further and could pass much quicker with support from new GOP legislative leaders.

"Ohio is going to be at the top of the heap in higher education reform," said Sen. Jerry Cirino, R-Kirtland, who is leading the charge. He and Rep. Tom Young, R-Washington Twp., are introducing companion bills titled the "Advance Ohio Higher Education Act." The Senate Higher Education Committee will start hearings on the proposal next week.

Universities and colleges that don't comply with the changes could risk losing their share of the \$2 billion Ohio spends on higher education operations and construction projects.

As Cirino and fellow Republicans pitched their bill, more than a dozen students chanted: "When academic freedom is under attack, stand up. Fight back" and "Students know Cirino wants higher ed dead." Ohio Highway Patrol and a sergeant at arms told students to leave but they refused, instead protesting quieter and moving to the nearby Statehouse rotunda.

Ohio's bill comes as a third of Americans have very little or no confidence in higher education, according to a June 2024 Gallup survey. That shift is particularly stark among Republicans, who responded by eliminating DEI programs at state universities in Florida last year and banning state DEI initiatives in Indiana days ago. President Donald Trump eliminated DEI across federal government offices with an executive order this week.

Pranav Jani, president of the Ohio State University chapter of the American Association of University Professors and an English professor, promised to fight against the fast-tracked bill, saying lawmakers were afraid of real intellectual diversity.

"Their model of education is to stand there, preach conservative ideas and call it intellectual diversity," Jani said. Our model of education is to teach students what they need to know about a topic so that they can think very widely, read very widely, write critically and stand on their own feet."

## **A DEI ban in higher education**

Senate Bill 1 would eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion from Ohio college campuses in almost all circumstances.

Universities couldn't conduct training or orientation about diversity, equity and inclusion, have a DEI office or list DEI in their job descriptions. The university couldn't offer any new scholarships based on diversity, equity and inclusion – an expansion of a 2023 U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down affirmative action in college admissions.

The proposed law goes further than Cirino's previous bill, which would have prohibited mandatory DEI programs – not eliminated them entirely.

"Taxpayers certainly shouldn't be paying for institutional discrimination," Cirino said of DEI programs. "It impacts other students' lives, students who do not fit whatever the mold is that they're looking for."

But Kierra Willis, a fourth-year student studying health sciences at Ohio State University, said Senate Bill 1 would threaten groups like the minority outreach and support one she attends. These spaces have become a family and home to Willis on campus.

The bill would prevent training or teaching that says: "an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously" or that "an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex."

There is an exception for research grants that require DEI. In those cases, the university must ask the Ohio Department of Higher Education for an exception to the DEI prohibition.

Brielle Shorter, a junior studying psychology at Ohio State University, said the bill is a problem in want of a solution: Conservative students aren't clamoring for protection because their ideas are unwelcome on campus.

"We just spent time, all of us, celebrating the national championship. I feel like students really are not concerned about that," Shorter said, citing Republican and conservative leaders who have spoken on campus.

## **Ban on faculty strikes returns**

The bill would also prohibit full-time faculty from striking. Cirino removed the strike ban from his prior proposal as a concession to House lawmakers. But that bill didn't pass in the last session so the idea is back.

"It's back in because it was important in the first place," Cirino said. "Students should not be used as pawns in the negotiation process. There are other mediation opportunities for faculty to take their grievances."

Faculty oppose strike bans because they eliminate a key tool in the bargaining process, creating a power imbalance. Jani said a strike ban would take away faculty's free speech in a bill sponsors tout as defending speech.

## **Changes to how faculty, degrees are eliminated**

Several changes would empower university trustees, who are appointed by the governor, to act more like a business' board of directors.

Every five years, trustees would reevaluate how often faculty must teach, research or provide clinical care to avoid disciplinary action, remedial training or termination – even if they have earned tenure.

"We have to start running these institutions like they are businesses," Cirino said.

Universities and colleges would also eliminate any undergraduate degree program if fewer than five students have earned degrees over three years. Cirino said the current process of eliminating programs is too cumbersome and doesn't allow higher education institutions to adjust to businesses' demands.

Faculty also would undergo annual performance evaluations, including feedback from peers and students. Students' evaluations would include the question: "Does the faculty member create a classroom atmosphere free of political, racial, gender and religious bias?"

Tenured faculty members who don't meet expectations on two of their most recent three performance reviews could face discipline or termination after a post-tenure review. "We need to make sure when they have that job guarantee that we are getting continuous improvement in what they're doing," Cirino said.

Cirino said he's not going after tenure. "I'm not proposing that we eliminate tenure. I think that would be a disadvantage for Ohio."

## **No position on 'controversial beliefs,' online syllabi: What else is in Senate Bill 1?**

The 70-plus-page bill would also:

- prohibit universities from taking positions on a "controversial belief or policy," defined as climate policies, politics, foreign policy, DEI programs, immigration policy, marriage, abortion or "any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy."
- require faculty and staff to allow students to "reach their own conclusions about all controversial beliefs or policies." Cirino said if a student falsely claimed gravity doesn't exist or the world is flat, the professor would point out evidence to the contrary. "They have a right to say something, as dumb as it may be."
- require professors and instructors to post their course syllabi online for students, parents and the public to see.
- reduce the tenure of university trustees from nine years to six years starting in mid-2025. Trustees would also have to complete training on their job responsibilities and trends in higher education.
- require students to complete a three-credit hour course on American civics literacy, including a review of capitalism and documents like the U.S. Constitution and the Emancipation Proclamation.
- prohibit universities and colleges from accepting gifts or donations from China.
- require approval from the Ohio Department of Higher Education to enter into new or renewed academic partnerships with Chinese research institutions. This would impact programs like the partnership between the University of Cincinnati's College of Engineering and Chongqing University. Chinese students could still attend Ohio universities and colleges.
- require the Ohio Department of Higher Education to review whether more degrees can be completed in three years instead of four.
- require universities and colleges to provide a five-year cost summary to lawmakers.

Chris Nichols, a history professor at Ohio State University, said the sweeping changes would make it harder to recruit faculty and open universities up to lawsuits. He would rather politicians stay in their lane.

"Why should politicians meddle in the best practices in English literature or history or national security? They shouldn't. They're not the experts."

*E.W. Scripps School of Journalism's Statehouse News Bureau fellow Donovan Hunt contributed to this article.*