

After Senate Bill 1, Ohio lawmakers want to give 'unilateral and ultimate' power to trustees

By **Jessie Balmert**
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The [ink has barely dried on the higher education overhaul Senate Bill 1](#), but Ohio lawmakers have more changes in mind for the state's universities and colleges.

Changes added to the state's two-year budget bill Tuesday would give university trustees "unilateral and ultimate authority" over new academic programs, schools, colleges, institutes, departments and centers – like the new "intellectual diversity" centers Republican lawmakers approved in 2023.

Under the proposal, faculty and their representative bodies, often called senates, could offer advice on curriculum and academic programs, but it would be ["advisory in nature"](#) and trustees would have the final say.

Faculty say that's a significant departure from the current system, where [professors and administrators](#) largely determine what students will learn and trustees sign off on it.

"This budget takes away any faculty involvement in the oversight, development and proposals of curriculum at the university, which is a fundamental aspect of shared governance," said Richard Finlay Fletcher, an Ohio State University associate professor who worked on the College of Arts & Sciences curriculum. University trustees' "role is one of oversight, not – as the budget proposes – one of 'unilateral and ultimate authority.'"

[Shared governance](#) is a concept in higher education where faculty, administrators, staff, governing bodies and sometimes students work together on research, curriculum and methods of instruction.

"It's one of the things that I love about my job, that we don't just turn up to teach our classes or we sit in our offices doing our research," Fletcher said. We run the university in collaboration with staff, with administrators."

GOP Rep. Tom Young, who leads the House higher education committee, says language in the budget is not that different from the current protocol. "The school just can't create a degree without the approval of the board of trustees."

Faculty worry the changes are part of a Republican push to give university trustees more power, making them more like a business's board of directors. Sen. Jerry Cirino, the GOP lawmaker who sponsored Senate Bill 1, said he supports giving trustees more authority.

Steve Mockabee, a University of Cincinnati associate professor, said that goes against how universities have been run. "It's part of the agenda of marginalizing the experts and centering the political appointees," he said.

Who are university trustees and what power do they have?

Each public university and college in Ohio has a [board of trustees ranging from nine to 15 people](#). Governors appoint these unpaid trustees to nine-year terms to choose university presidents, set tuition rates, approve personnel and OK curriculum changes. (Senate Bill 1 would reduce their tenure to six years.)

Trustees are often accomplished alumni, executives and donors, but few are academics. Ohio State's board of trustees, for example, includes a former Ohio prisons director, the founding partner of a Columbus law firm and a former Marathon Petroleum executive.

"The board of trustees is appointed by the state. They are not experts within higher education," Fletcher said. "They do important work for our community and for our university, but this is not their purview."

Mockabee also questioned whether trustees would have the time and interest in crafting a curriculum for thousands of courses at large universities like UC and OSU.

"It's part of a larger ideological agenda, but in practice, I don't see boards really changing what they're doing because it doesn't make sense," he said.

Civic centers would be entities unto themselves

Another change in the budget would allow Ohio's five "intellectual diversity centers" to develop and approve each other's courses and curriculum.

These centers, created by Ohio's GOP-controlled Legislature in 2023 and given \$2 million a year to operate, are tasked with boosting civil discourse and researching the foundation of the American constitutional order.

Young said each civics center will be an entity unto itself, especially regarding course design and approval. Fletcher worries this will create an "alternative university system" on campus that exists outside the control of even the board of trustees.

The civics center at Ohio State University has faced some pushback. The [University's Senate voted against establishing the center](#), but the [board of trustees approved it anyway](#).

Trustees to review universities' general education curriculum

The budget also requires university trustees to evaluate their institution's general education curriculum by March 31 and adjust it to cover:

- civics, culture and society (which mirrors the language for the state's five civics centers)
- artificial intelligence, STEM and computational thinking
- entrepreneurship and the principles of innovation
- workforce readiness

Fletcher said Ohio State already performed a rigorous review of its general education requirements.

"The idea that by the end of this calendar year there's going to be suggestions on how to change that from the university trustees goes against everything that we did in that review," he said. "Why is this in the budget? What has this got to do with the budget?"

Three-year, accelerated degrees and levies for community colleges

Another change would require each university to create at least one accelerated degree program for an in-demand job in the state. Most bachelor's degrees require 120 credit hours over about four years, but this degree would require 90 instead.

"We have certain needs that we can do an accelerated degree in," Young said. "It makes a lot of sense."

Language added to the budget would also allow a community college to ask voters in its county to approve a tax levy for operations.

The Ohio House of Representatives plans to approve its version of the two-year state budget on April 9. After that, the Senate will make more changes. Those differences must be hashed out before Gov. Mike DeWine signs the bill. The budget's final deadline is June 30.