

## CAMPUS

# As SB 1 impacts ripple across Ohio college campuses, students, faculty say 'the chill is real'



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Two months into her final fall semester, Ohio State University senior Sabrina Estevez said the ripple effect of [Ohio Senate Bill 1](#) on campus has been "like a quiet roar."

Between [new required "intellectual diversity" statements](#) on every course syllabus, funding cuts to the university's [former diversity, equity and inclusion programming](#), and lingering questions about what exactly is allowed to be discussed in the classroom, Estevez said SB 1 has many returning students feeling a lot of uncertainty.

"No one says 'SB 1' in the classroom, but it is ever present," said Estevez, a North Canton native studying political science and international studies.

While the new academic year is fully in swing, Ohio public university students, staff and faculty are figuring out how to navigate their campuses for the first time under SB 1, also known as the Advance Ohio Higher Education Act.

[In late March, Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine signed SB 1](#) after a whirlwind dash to pass the massive higher education overhaul by Ohio Republicans, led by the bill's sponsor Sen. Jerry Cirino, R-Kirtland. The law, among other things, bans diversity, equity and inclusion programs on public college campuses, bans faculty strikes,

limits the power of tenure among university educators and prevents higher education institutions from taking positions on “controversial beliefs or policies.”

The bill moved through the Ohio Statehouse as the Trump administration slashed the U.S. Department of Education's workforce and sent a "Dear Colleague" letter giving schools an ultimatum to either eliminate "race-based decision-making" from their campuses by the end of the month or risk losing federal funding.

SB 1 officially went into effect in late June. Though some [changes took place over the summer](#) — like Kent State University shuttering its LGBTQ+ Center, Women's Center and Student Multicultural Center and the University of Toledo cutting nine undergraduate majors, from Africana studies and philosophy — this is the first full semester to begin under the new law.

Cirino told The Dispatch that he's pleased by the work that university administrators and boards of trustees have done so far to implement the law.

But for some, according to students and faculty from multiple universities who spoke with The Dispatch, the rollout has been chaotic, confusing and already causing a chilling effect. Though there's been compliance in line with the bill, certain actions — [like Ohio State's ban on chalking in August that the university says was unrelated to SB 1](#) — has raised questions from many on university campuses about what exactly falls under SB 1.

"It's a wild west in terms of interpreting the bill," said Chris Orban, an Ohio State physics professor who works on both the Columbus and Marion campuses.

Chalking has long been a popular practice on campus. Students write slogans, announcements and political commentary in chalk on the sidewalks around campus. SB 1 didn't ban the practice, which is popular on other campuses too, but Ohio State's decision followed a trend among universities stopping expressive activities in the wake of pro-Palestinian demonstrations on campuses around the country.

Professors at Ohio State called the decision to ban chalking an "assault on free speech."

"Whether governments or administrators, once they start rolling back free speech, they don't stop," a statement from the Ohio State chapter of the American Association of University Professors read.

## 'The chill is real'

One piece of the law that has been particularly confusing for some faculty and students is the banning of institutional positions on controversial topics.

**SB 1 defines a "controversial belief or policy"** as "any belief or policy that is the subject of political controversy, including issues such as climate policies, electoral politics, foreign policy, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, immigration policy, marriage, or abortion."

The law states that universities cannot "endorse or oppose" any controversial belief "except on matters that directly impact the institution's funding or mission of discovery, improvement and dissemination of knowledge."

It also requires that universities "will not encourage, discourage, require, or forbid students, faculty, or administrators to endorse, assent to, or publicly express a given ideology, political stance, or view of a social policy, nor will the institution require students to do any of those things to obtain an undergraduate or post-graduate degree."

Stephen Mockabee, president of the University of Cincinnati's American Association of University Professors chapter, said this provision has been among the common concerns of his peers. **An earlier iteration from the last General Assembly, Senate Bill 83**, was more restrictive than the current law. But it's still on the minds of many in higher education, he said.

"I hear from faculty, 'Do I need to change my syllabus? Do I need to change how I'm teaching certain topics? Will I still be credited for research if it involves DEI?'" Mockabee said.

SB 1 doesn't include any language restricting research, Mockabee said, and it's clear that classroom discussions can continue.

"But the fact that we're getting those questions reveals the problem with this kind of legislation," he said. "It creates a chilling effect."

Faculty at other Ohio public universities are feeling a similar chill on their campuses.

Christopher McKnight Nichols, an Ohio State history professor and a member of OSU's American Association of University Professors legislative committee, said it's been a conversation among students, staff and faculty since the beginning of the semester.

Nichols said he's definitely seen a chill among staff and instructional faculty who lack tenure protections.

"They're feeling constrained and vulnerable," he said. "First-year professors are on edge."

Nichols said the vagueness of SB 1 has led some faculty to question if they will be truly supported by the university in their academic pursuits. He's heard from colleagues questioning if they should propose a new African American history course and from students wondering if it's OK to write a research thesis on terrorism right now. He noted that he's heard from a few graduate students who say they don't want to be a teaching assistant for "controversial" classes, like modern American history.

That is especially true of international graduate students, he said.

"I think most of them are fully chilled," Nichols said.

Jared Gardner, an Ohio State English professor and secretary of its University Senate, put it bluntly: "The chill is real."

Mark Vopat, a Youngstown State University philosophy professor and its faculty union president, said self-censorship is growing right now on his campus. That's in part because of new requirements under SB 1 to revise student evaluations of their professors to include the question: "Does the faculty member create a classroom atmosphere free of political, racial, gender, and religious bias?"

Vopat said many faculty are wondering, if a rogue student disagrees with something from class, "Will the university have their backs?"

"What does it mean for something to be 'politically controversial'?" Vopat said. "It's not controversial in my discipline. It's established position in my field. But could someone say otherwise?"

Vopat said he's still teaching his ethics courses as he normally would, but he's handling some interaction with more caution, specifically in casual conversations with students before and after class.

"I'm half-jokingly giving a disclaimer outside of class, 'This is my opinion, not reflective of my department,'" he said. "I've never felt the need to say that before. It does put distance between you and the student, and it's put there by the state."

Estevez said she's felt the chill in some of her classes at Ohio State. Some professors have said nothing will change, while others are making more-general statements.

"Students want to talk about it, but professors can't really engage in those conversations," she said.

## **Faculty say over-compliance causing confusion on campuses**

Faculty members at multiple public universities statewide told The Dispatch that the speed by which SB 1 was implemented has led to over-compliance and clunky applications.

At the University of Cincinnati, for instance, Mockabee said faculty are currently pushing back against language and a check box added to the university's course creation form affirming they've read and understand UC's "dedication to intellectual diversity."

The law does require that universities "demonstrate intellectual diversity for course approval," among other things, but it does not specify how that should happen in practice.

"How can somebody know that? How are they supposed to attest that intellectual diversity was considered?" Mockabee said.

Mockabee said there's been over-compliance both big and small across the state. The leader in SB 1 over-compliance, he said, is Ohio State.

Some Ohio State faculty, staff and students criticized the university's leadership for prematurely complying with SB 1 in February when it announced it would shutter its Office of Diversity and Inclusion and Center for Belonging and Social Change and eliminate 16 staff positions.

In a virtual meeting with some Office of Diversity and Inclusion staffers at the time, Ohio State Provost Ravi V. Bellamkonda told employees their positions "are risky to defend legally" against federal mandates and state statutes like SB 1. "We can either wait for the bill to pass and respond in a way we can't control, or we can respond in a way that works best for all of us," Bellamkonda said.

Ohio State President Ted Carter has said that these decisions were made in response to U.S. Department of Education mandates to not lose federal funding.

This academic year has brought its own questions of over-compliance.

The university said it "prematurely" edited the mission statements of [alumni affinity groups to eliminate words like "Asian & Pacific Islander" and "Latinx"](#) on the day that SB 1 went into effect.

Resident halls advisers learned right before the start of fall semester that they can **only decorate the common spaces on their floors in "Ohio State spirit" themes**. SB 1 was "certainly a factor" in the decision, one university spokesman said, with the goal "to create an open and welcoming environment for all students."

Then faculty and staff found out earlier this semester that Ohio State would no longer allow land acknowledgements on syllabi. **A land acknowledgment** is a formal statement that recognizes the Indigenous people who originally inhabited a specific territory, respects their continued connection to the land and acknowledges the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism.

Gardner, who worked on SB 1 compliance issues all summer for Ohio State's University Senate, said he was surprised by the ban.

"This felt like a step into blocking academic freedom," he said. "You're telling us that we can't give this out in a classroom? This isn't a political statement; this is a settled fact."

After some back and forth, the ban was revised and the language loosened to once again allow land acknowledgements in many circumstances.

Gardner said it was an unfortunate misstep of over-compliance by the university.

"Is this what we want to be on the cutting edge of?" he said.

Cirino said that SB 1 does not address campus signage or dorm decorations. However, Cirino said the letter and the spirit of the law are two different things.

"I think it's more than fine for me that administrations and boards of trustees enact policies that are in the spirit of the law," he said.

Nichols said over-compliance is a natural consequence of the law. Vagueness of the bill, he said, will lead to vagueness in implementation.

While Nichols described Ohio State's approach to implementing SB 1 as "risk averse," Mockabee said he thinks it's more than that.

"There are a lot of administrations saying they're taking a risk-averse approach. That's generous," he said. "I think they're just cowardly. You can't placate an authoritarian by complying once."

## **What's next for SB 1?**

It's going to take a while to see major effects of SB 1 on campuses as large as Ohio's public universities. There are still a number of deadlines for schools to meet throughout the academic year, and some measures, like a new required American history course, won't get off the ground until the 2026-2027 school year.

A group of university provosts is meeting to try and create some common guidelines for implementing SB 1.

But between the law's ambiguity, continued attacks on higher education at the federal level, examples of shared governance being diminished in states like Texas and Florida, there is an unease among many faculty and staff members statewide, Nichols said.

There is a sense, he said, that university administrators don't know exactly what could trigger a problem with the state, so guidance has been sparse. Some are wondering what will be the first legal litmus test of SB 1.

Gardner said he expects more clunky attempts at compliance in time. That's what happens when you're navigating uncertainty from a risk-averse position, he said.

But Gardner said he trusts that university administrators will ultimately defend academic freedom. He and his colleagues are asking for clarity, consistency and content-neutrality in implementing SB 1.

"I need my university to trust me. They need to trust us to make responsible decisions, and we need to trust them to give us clarity," Gardner said.

Cirino said he expects to see "continued good guidance from provosts" in implementing the law. He warned "resistance will be to no avail because we're taking this very seriously."

Cirino said he hasn't seen any negative outcomes of SB 1, like faculty or students leaving the state in droves.

At least one student, however, said she isn't planning to continue her education in Ohio. While she once wanted to be a "Double Buckeye," Estevez said she plans to attend law school out of state once she graduates in May.

"The merit of a degree is at stake not just at Ohio State but across Ohio," she said.

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