

Report to University Senate via Faculty Council
Committee on Academic Freedom and Responsibility

The Ohio State University

10 February 2026
Revised 27 February 2026

When the Advance Ohio Higher Education Law, aka [Ohio Senate Bill 1 \(SB 1\)](#), went into effect on 27 June 2025, public universities in Ohio established norms and mechanisms to ensure compliance. This report presupposes that—though SB 1 is presently settled law—the specific norms and mechanisms established at Ohio State in 2025 to ensure compliance with the law remain open to reconsideration and reform.

This report considers compliance measures adopted in 2025 concerning scholarly participation in academic conferences. Academic conferences are organized by many different types of organizations. Participation at academic conferences is fundamental to the development of scholarship, for such events facilitate scholarly debate, public dissemination of research, and the recruitment and training of new scholars. Conference participation is also necessary for Ohio State’s competitiveness: because publication and funding decisions are typically made through peer review, networking is an important part of a successful scholarship program. Moreover, the sustainability of academic programs and individual research programs depends upon the recruitment of top talent at the faculty, postdoctoral and graduate student levels.

It is common for academic conferences to include elements or themes which address matters concerning diversity, equity, and inclusion (hereafter DEI). SB 1 imposes new restrictions on *institutional* DEI infrastructure and compelled ideological practices at public universities in Ohio. The legislation did not create clear restrictions concerning the participation of *individual* scholars at academic conferences which involve some DEI-relevant themes or elements. The University’s [SB 1 Implementation Guide](#) appears to prohibit the use of university funds to attend conferences from affinity groups or where the “primary purpose” is DEI, but those issues do not appear to be addressed directly in the text of SB 1. Recent communication from the federal Department of Justice and Department of Education have also raised questions within the university about the use of funds to attend conferences organized by affinity- or identity-related groups. The question then arises: when and how can students and faculty at Ohio State participate in academic conferences that involve DEI-related elements or that are organized by affinity- or identity-related groups?

CAFR’s mandate

The Committee on Academic Freedom and Responsibility (hereafter CAFR) is charged to “study all conditions which may affect the academic freedom or responsibility of the faculty of the university.” If the committee finds “that any such condition or proposed change adversely affects academic freedom, responsibility, or tenure, it shall report that find promptly to the [University S]enate for its review.” This document constitutes such a report.

CAFR understands academic freedom as the freedom of all those engaged in research and teaching for Ohio State University to research, to seek to publish and otherwise disseminate their research, and to teach, as they judge is appropriate. This freedom is secure only when:

- its exercise is promoted and protected by both the stated content and actual application of university policy;
- its exercise is not threatened, in policy or effect, by the broader politics and policies that surround the university.

Relevant rules regarding academic freedom

Ohio State Faculty Rule 3335-5-01 enshrines presentation of research findings as a principal element of academic freedom. Rule 3335-5-03 states that the protection of academic freedom is “not restricted to activities identified with specific instructional, research or public service programs.”

It is CAFR’s interpretation of Ohio State’s rules and norms concerning academic freedom that faculty and students enjoy the freedom to present their research findings before the public, including at academic conferences; further, it is CAFR’s view that, as a matter of the interpretation of rules and norms concerning academic freedom, as well as long-standing tradition at our university, that faculty and students who participate in academic conferences enjoy the freedom to participate fully and to discuss scholarly matters generally with other conference participants, including for the purposes of networking or recruiting.

The SACNAS case

The question under consideration came to CAFR’s attention because The Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science ([SACNAS](#)) held its 2025 annual meeting at the Greater Columbus Convention Center (30 October-1 November). SACNAS works to enhance the success of Hispanics and Native Americans in STEM disciplines. Its membership is not limited by race or ethnicity (over [40% of its members](#) do not identify as either Hispanic/Latino or Native American). The annual National Diversity in STEM (NDiSTEM) conference organized by SACNAS is a premiere opportunity for STEM students and faculty to present research. The conference [does not limit participation](#) based on race or ethnicity. Research presentations may or may not address themes related to race or ethnicity.

In July 2025, the U.S. Department of Justice released a [memo](#) with guidance regarding unlawful discrimination. In September, Anne Garcia, the University’s General Counsel, presented guidance from the Office of Legal Affairs on recommendations for implementation of provisions of that memo. That guidance states that the norms:

Allow for continued participation in recruitment activities or programs with/sponsored by affinity and identity-based organizations where the college or unit can (1) clearly articulate and document legitimate factors for engagement; (2) demonstrate that this engagement has discipline-specific relevance and is part of a broader recruitment strategy; and, (3) confirm that the organization is open to all without regard to protected class status.

However, several departments have issued guidance that expenses related to participation in DEI-related conferences could not be reimbursed using University funds, possibly in response to the SB 1 Implementation Guide. In September 2025, OSU was among several universities that received a [letter of finding and draft resolution](#) agreement from the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Education related to prior participation in the PhD Project, which

allegedly violated Title VI. The agreement stated that universities will conduct a review of memberships or partnerships with organizations that restrict participation based on race. The U.S. Department of Education [announced in February 2026](#) that OSU was among 31 colleges and universities that signed the OCR resolution agreement.

At the end of September, guidance from department and college officials in the College of Arts and Sciences (as reported in *The Columbus Dispatch*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The Lantern*) stated that conference registration or other expenses associated with participation in SACNAS’s NDiSTEM meeting could not be reimbursed. Subsequently, on October 2, Provost Ravi Bellamkonda and Anne Garcia announced that faculty members and students “scheduled to present *research* or participate in sessions that advance their *research*” could attend the SACNAS conference and use university funds to do so, yet those attending solely for *recruitment* must use personal resources to attend.¹ Consequently, some exhibit tables reserved on behalf of programs and departments in the colleges of Arts & Sciences, Engineering and Medicine were abandoned. Some faculty, staff and students who were expecting to participate in recruiting did not attend the meeting.

Findings

1. Meaningful participation in academic conferences should not be limited to delivering research presentations. Scholars do not merely attend conferences to present their own work, but also to listen to other scholars present their results. Such engagement is fundamental to scholarly activity and the exercise of academic freedom.
2. Networking and recruiting activities cannot be divorced from delivering and listening to presentations. Presentations constitute a form of research dissemination but also comprise opportunities for recruiting graduate students and demonstrating competence to potential peer reviewers. By implication, academic conferences are events where ostensibly distinct faculty activities—research, teaching, and service—blend organically.
3. Limiting the use of university funds to research presentations does not appear to be required by or directly responsive to SB 1 or federal law. The very threat of limiting such use of funds constitutes a threat to scholarly participation in academic conferences and thus a threat to Ohio State’s rules and norms on academic freedom.
4. As the SACNAS case demonstrated, Ohio State’s present approach to compliance with SB 1 and federal guidance apropos participation in conferences with a DEI-related theme or elements (or organized by group based on affinity or identity) is discouraging legitimate scholarly participation.
5. CAFR therefore finds that the present interpretation constitutes a “condition ... [that] adversely affects academic freedom, responsibility, or tenure” at The Ohio State University.
6. CAFR thus issues this “report ... to the [University S]enate for its review”, and
7. CAFR advises that body to encourage the University to revise the language apropos compliance to ensure that academic freedom is protected.

¹ Our italics. For statements by Bellamkonda and Garcia, see news accounts cited above.

Addendum. On 23 February 2026, CAFR received the following clarifications from Helen Malone, Vice-Provost of OAA:

As noted on [this website](#) [the University Implementation Guide regarding Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Prohibitions], faculty, staff, and students, may engage in activities using their own funds, technology, and personal time.

a. Conferences

- i. Faculty and students whose academic research covers a DEI subject matter may attend academic conferences and use university funds to attend.
- ii. Faculty, staff and students may attend, and use university funds to pay for, professional conferences with a non-DEI primary purpose. If the conference includes a session that may constitute a DEI training, individuals may participate.
- iii. Ohio State will not promote or pay for faculty, staff or students to attend conferences for which the primary purpose is DEI training or education; however, Ohio State employees may attend these development opportunities using their own funds, technology and personal time. The same applies to external affiliations with professional groups or affinity groups – employees may attend these opportunities using their own funds, technology and personal time.
- iv. Faculty and staff, or third-party representatives contracted by the university are not permitted to attend conferences or events for the purpose of promoting admissions, hiring or promotion based on a specified protected class
- v. Conferences hosted by Ohio State should not include sessions that are DEI trainings or include DEI subject matter. When third-parties or outside entities are renting or using university space, university staff members should not participate in or assist with DEI trainings or conferences, beyond the operational requirements of their university staff duties (i.e. room set-up, A/V operations, etc.). This does not apply to colleges, departments or academic units hosting seminars, academic talks or academic research conferences in their area of study or expertise. SB 1 does allow certain other exceptions, and additional details can be found on the Ohio State SB 1 Compliance website.