

President Ben Sasse
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611

An open letter regarding the recent removal of DEI positions on behalf of UF Faculty and Graduate Assistants

President Sasse,

Members of the University of Florida chapter of the United Faculty of Florida (UFF) are writing to you today to share our disappointment in the continued attacks on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in our state, placing Florida's students at a competitive disadvantage.

Students in Florida deserve the right to take part in conversations that they feel will challenge them and help them as they interact with the world around them. Likewise, staff, faculty and graduate assistants in Florida deserve the right to know that they are supported in doing what they do best.

With the recent news that UF terminated 13 staff positions and halted DEI administrative assignments for another 15 faculty members, it's clear that winning one-sided political arguments is more important to our state's leaders than ensuring our students can benefit from a world-class higher education. UF must ensure that the staff they hired has the ability to retain employment.

While Florida's Governor seems to take a [perverse joy](#) in attacking diversity, equity and inclusion, the sentiment is not shared by your faculty or your graduate assistants, whether they are members of our union or not. We want to be clear: the action to terminate positions and halt assignments by UF goes against the core principles of United Faculty of Florida at UF, which traces its very origins to resistance against UF's actions during the civil rights era.

The elimination of DEI staff positions and programming at UF is the most recent blow to the integrity of our academic institution— but it isn't the first and we know, it won't be the last. For the past four years, the Florida state legislature has passed unconstitutional laws aimed at limiting academic freedom, faculty and graduate assistant rights, and student educational access. These laws have simultaneously undermined the prestige, competitiveness, and rigor of our state university system. UF administration has shown eager complicity in this erosion of our academy- exemplified by their "going over-and-above" approach towards compliance with new unconstitutional Florida state laws and Board of Governors' regulations.

The Florida Board of Governors' and the Florida legislature have worked nonstop to silence discussion and education around histories of oppression and marginalization. Denying that there are historically dominant groups that instituted systemic oppression against historically marginalized groups, or denying that these inequities must be proactively addressed isn't mere denial: it represents active support for such oppression. Couching such support in "color-blindness" or "anti-discrimination" language is merely Orwellian spin.

The elimination of DEI offices represents one of many instances of this silencing. The same distorted framing was used by the Florida state legislature and Governor DeSantis to justify their "Stop WOKE

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Act”, which remains under an injunction because parts of it were ruled unconstitutional, including a part involving restrictions around diversity training. We will also point to the Florida Board of Education and the Board of Governors’ recent decisions to remove Sociology from the list of courses that undergraduate students can take as part of their General Education requirements. The elimination of DEI is one of the moving parts in a concerted effort to create higher education programs that create unquestioning civilians in the face of rising fascism.

Structurally, DEI programming and dedicated staff were voluntarily recruited by UF and paid because their work improved the productivity of UF. For example, in modern academia, there is widespread concern for ensuring representation of a diversity of perspectives and life experiences, and investment towards this shared goal is heavily considered in grant awards. Now that UF has eliminated DEI, all UF researchers will be in the uncomfortable position of explaining to grant application review committees that their institution has no interest in cultivating diversity of thought, in ensuring members of our academic community feel safe and welcome, or forming relationships of trust with marginalized members of the community, so that research findings will be representative and generalizable. Further, by eliminating DEI, UF is also opening itself up to having to make restitutions for federal civil rights violations which could have otherwise been prevented through job training provided by DEI staff and programs.

UF's reputation will take a further hit as the state's political apparatus callously continues to destroy a higher education system painstakingly built over decades. Faculty, students, and graduate assistants will leave, and potential recruits will not apply despite vehement denials to the contrary by UF's leadership.

To justify their attacks on the rights of faculty, students, and graduate assistants, in service of authoritatively imposing their preferred political ideology, this “anti-woke” political movement has worked to misrepresent DEI as, itself, the work of a “woke” political movement. This allows them to accuse their enemies of doing what they are in fact doing: using state power to impose ideological conformity on current and future citizens.

The Board of Trustees either do not care or have become so deluded that they fail to understand this. Regardless, we cannot rely on UF to protect our most marginalized workers. UF has made it clear that it will not even do so when it is within its own self-interest. We, the workers whose labor keeps UF operational, are united in our union to find our full, collective power, and use that power to shape UF into an institution that tackles the root causes of systemic inequality and works towards educational liberation. We will not remain silent and will continue to stand together.

Signed in Solidarity,

Meera Sitharam, President, UFF-UF Faculty Chapter
Eva Garcia Ferres, Co-President, UFF-UF Graduate Assistants United Chapter
Jacob Fiala, Co-President, UFF-UF Graduate Assistants United Chapter
Teresa M. Hodge, President, United Faculty of Florida
Andrew Spar, President, Florida Education Association

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