

From DEI to DIY: Anti-DEI Laws Driving Student and Faculty-Led Inclusion Efforts

By: Nas Lawal

In a time when diversity is more important than ever, universities are stepping away from the very programs meant to promote it. In the aftermath of the [Students for Fair Admissions Cases](#) (SFFA), several states have enacted legislation to repeal their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) [initiatives](#). Notably, two states stand out: Texas and Florida. Both states were two of the first to enact legislation to repeal DEI in their [respective states](#). Texas passed SB 17, which went into effect [January 1, 2024](#), and Florida passed SB 266 which went into effect [July 1, 2023](#). These legislative changes signal a shift in how universities in these states and the country at large handle DEI. This new landscape has unjustly transferred much of the responsibility onto [students and faculty to create inclusive spaces on their campuses](#).

Florida & Texas' Anti-DEI Laws

Lawmakers introduced [more than 30 bills](#) targeting DEI initiatives and policies at public universities across the country. These bills were not created in isolation or without precedent. While SFFA may have opened the floodgates to allow these laws to be permissible, these laws were foreseeable. Florida, for instance, has a history of passing controversial legislation [governing universities](#). In 2022, Governor Ron Desantis signed HB 7, also known as the “[STOP Woke Act](#),” into law which prohibited schools and universities from teaching [Critical Race Theory](#) (CRT). The following year Florida would pass SB 266, which gave university governing boards the power to decide which [courses count towards the core curriculum](#). As a result, a university could effectively [discourage students from taking courses with a nexus to DEI or CRT](#). This legislation reflects a broader trend in Florida aimed at suppressing efforts to promote diversity in both [classroom composition and curriculum content](#).

Texas followed a similar path. Prior to enacting SB 17, the Texas legislature passed [SB 16](#) in 2022, [preventing public universities from teaching CRT](#). SB 16 was the first of a [trio of bills](#) aimed at higher education in the state. These laws are evidence of a post-SFFA push by the Texas legislature to curtail discussions of race and diversity in higher education, setting the stage for more measures in the future.

The Fallout of Anti-DEI Measures on College Campuses

The impacts of these measures on college campuses are becoming immediately apparent. In 2024, [twelve public universities in Florida eliminated DEI positions](#). At the University of Florida alone, this resulted in the termination of [thirteen full-time faculty positions](#). At Florida

International University [twenty-two courses were dropped from the core curriculum](#). The same is true in Texas. In 2024, approximately [sixty staff members were terminated](#) at the University of Texas to comply with SB 17. Numerous divisions and centers dedicated to providing support for minority student organizations shifted their focus to be inclusive to all students and centers dedicated to supporting minority students, like the popular Multicultural Engagement Center, were [forced to close](#). These new restrictions forced students and faculty, rather than administrators, to take on the burden of advancing DEI initiatives.

Protests, Rebrands, and Workarounds to Fill the Void

Even in this uncertain landscape, the unwavering resolve of university students is unmatched. As Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson articulated in her dissenting opinion, [“\[a\]lthough formal race-linked legal barriers are gone, race still matters to the lived experiences of all Americans in innumerable ways.”](#) As formal DEI programs disappear, the need for them persists, leaving students and faculty to take matters into their own hands. Their creativity and determination have led to innovative workarounds that comply with the new laws while still serving their original goals.

For example, at Florida Atlantic University students rebranded their annual drag show to [“Owl Manor,”](#) and launched an LGBTQ+ newspaper called [“Out FAU.”](#) Some faculty have followed suit, even going as far as to refusing to the laws outright. At the University of Central Florida, Professor Robert Cassanello, teaches a course on the Civil Rights Movement and warns students on his syllabus, he [“will expose you to content that does not comply with and will violate”](#) anti-DEI laws.

In Texas, students and faculty also acted. In May 2024, students and faculty at the University of Texas marched from the University of Texas tower to the state capitol to [testify at a senate hearing on SB 17](#). In August 2024, students at the University of Houston (UH) organized a protest of [over 90 students](#) with the support of Texas Representative Jolanda Jones. Others are taking advantage of grey areas in the law. After the closure of UH’s LGBTQ Resource Center, the university opened the [“Center for Student Advocacy and Community”](#), which, while not targeting any specific population, helps fill the gap left by the terminated center and works to [reduce barriers to academic success for students](#).

Some universities have looked towards alumni support for funding to continue their programs. For instance, after SB 17 cut funding for affinity-based graduation ceremonies at the University of Texas, Texas Exes, the university's alumni network, stepped in to sponsor the ceremonies ([e.g. Black Graduation, GraduAsian, Latinx Graduation, and Lavender Graduation](#)). A task that was usually handled by a team of full-time employees is now left in the hands of a group of volunteer students and faculty determined not to let old traditions die. These collective efforts highlight the resilience of students and faculty in preserving diversity and inclusion initiatives despite legislative restrictions.

Conclusion

In the face of restrictive anti-DEI laws, actions from students and faculty at Florida and Texas public universities are tangible illustrations of what is possible when determination meets creativity. Florida and Texas are just some of the first states to adopt anti-DEI bills and will likely not be the last, as there are currently [more anti-DEI bills](#) on the horizon. The efforts of students and faculty to rebrand events, establish new centers, and secure alumni support highlight their resolve to maintain spaces of belonging and advocacy, and must continue if diversity and inclusion are to maintain focal points on college campuses. The fight for inclusivity is far from over, and these grassroots efforts are a testament to the power of collective action in the face of overwhelming adversity.