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Michigan Regents Face Tough Questions as They Consider DEI Changes

Debate about diversity, equity and inclusion programs suggests a new degree of worry and proactive preparation as Donald Trump returns to the White House.

By [Jessica Blake](#)



The University of Michigan has faced fierce pushback this week as it considers changes to DEI programs.

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The University of Michigan—historically one of the country's staunchest supporters of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts—indicated at a Board of

Regents meeting Thursday that it is reconsidering its DEI programs ahead



The regents didn't vote on any specific DEI reforms or budget measures at the meeting, and they went out of their way to discuss efforts to preserve socioeconomic and intellectual diversity on campus. But they also asked a university administrator to quell "rumors" and "speak in fact" about how to prepare for Trump 2.0 and what his administration could mean for Michigan's storied DEI program.

Even before Trump's re-election, public colleges in red states across the country were responding to conservative pushback against DEI initiatives by consolidating, renaming and even closing departments dedicated to supporting underrepresented communities—often, though not always, in response to legislation. But Thursday's board meeting and comments of concern from Michigan officials suggest a new degree of worry and proactive preparation for the reckoning they fear lies ahead.

"I've been told pretty bluntly that Congress and this administration will use whatever tools they can to have us yield to what they want us to do—and DEI is one of those

things they think need to be eliminated from higher ed.” Chris Kolb, the university’s

The university has already taken some pre-emptive steps. Just hours before the regents convened, officials announced Michigan will no longer require diversity statements as part of faculty hiring, promotion and tenure decisions. And in October, the regents, who are elected by state constituents, unanimously adopted a policy of institutional neutrality, barring administrators from making official statements on political issues or controversies off campus.

At the same time, they have made an effort to affirm their commitment to equity and inclusion. During Thursday’s board meeting, regents celebrated the expansion of a need-based aid program, known as the Go Blue Guarantee. Designed to increase socioeconomic diversity, the program originally covered 100 percent of tuition for all students with a household income of up to \$75,000. But starting next fall, the threshold will rise to \$125,000, benefiting an additional 2,200 current students and likely many incoming freshmen.

Taken together, Michigan’s latest developments reflect a new, more nuanced approach to equity and inclusion that may become commonplace in states across the country—regardless of local politics—as higher ed prepares for heightened scrutiny from a federal Republican trifecta. In addition to DEI programs, higher ed experts warn that universities’ ties to China and population of undocumented students, as well as their responses to Title IX regulations and antisemitism allegations, are likely targets of Republican lawmakers.

“The morning of Nov. 6, the political landscape changed dramatically,” Kolb said. “Higher education is in the spotlight more than ever.”

Rallies, Rumors and Responses

The Michigan regents made no formal decisions to defund any DEI programs or

regents about redirecting funds away from “bloated administrative bureaucracy,” have sparked criticism and confusion among students and staff.

Hundreds rallied on the flagship Ann Arbor campus throughout the week to defend minority student support services, cultural centers, community outreach efforts and training programs.

Some faculty have warned that the regents may seek to defund DEI entirely. A letter from Faculty Senate chair Rebekah Modrak to the governing body’s members, which described a private board meeting allegedly held earlier this month to discuss Michigan’s approach to equity, warned of “impending threats” and “sweeping defunding” of DEI as a result of “political pressure.”

But one regent told *Inside Higher Ed* that discussions about the campus climate and DEI were happening long before the election and intensified last October, when protests over the Israel-Hamas war began. Others added at Thursday’s meeting that eliminating DEI would be a drastic step that is not under consideration.

Regent Michael Behm, a Democrat, openly refuted the idea of cutting any DEI programs.

“I don’t think there’s a person sitting at the table that plans to make any cuts to any of those programs,” he said.

“You can’t believe anything you read on the internet, and this is certainly one of those moments,” Regent Jordan Acker, also a Democrat, said shortly after.

Regent Sarah Hubbard, a Republican, has been a leading advocate for eliminating diversity statements, as well as adopting institutional neutrality to protect free speech and ensure intellectual diversity. In an interview with *Inside Higher Ed*, she said that while decisions about funding have yet to be made, they will be up for discussion come the spring.

“We’re spending a lot of money on these things, and we want to be sure that we’re being good stewards of taxpayer and public funds,” she said. “We need to do everything we can to be sure the university is a place where all walks of life are welcome, where all beliefs are welcome.”

But even she said concerns that the university will completely eliminate DEI are “unfounded.”

Frustration Continues

Still, faculty and students remain frustrated and confused by the board’s actions. Most want things to stay the way they are and seem despondent about the future of DEI.

During her report to the board at Thursday's meeting, Associate Provost ... Ph.D.

"We urge the regents to build bridges and not walls with your student population," she said.

Then, during the public comment portion of the meeting, Stephen Ward, an associate professor of Afroamerican and African studies, paused for a moment of quiet, encouraging board members to listen to the faint cries of protesters outside.

"You've received our communications asking you to declare your commitments to DEI, and yet you've refused to do so," he said. "Respectfully, there would not be any speculation on our part if it was clear communication from you."

Only one commenter, Keith Riles, a physics professor, spoke in favor of cutting DEI, urging the board "to rip out all of the DEI industrial complex at these campuses."

"Affirmative action, now cynically packaged as DEI, is corrosive to this institution," he said. "This university is one lawsuit away from another humiliating trip to the U.S. or perhaps Michigan Supreme Court."

Many campus community members, including Pragya Choudhary, a third-year undergraduate who has led DEI efforts for multiple student organizations, say they will continue to speak out and advocate for the protection of DEI services.

As a transgender man who has often depended on the university's LGBTQ center, Choudhary believes saving DEI is about more than just protecting positions of leadership; it's about preserving access to a safe, quality education for himself and his peers.