

UT-Austin announces round of firings in latest step to comply with Texas' DEI ban

The firings come after state leaders criticized universities for not doing enough to enforce the ban. Students say UT-Austin has already overcorrected.

By Annie Xia and Sneha Dey, April 2, 2024

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The University of Texas at Austin has laid off dozens employees who used to work in (DEI) diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

The university fired about 60 people and some of the offices where they worked are expected to close by May 31, according to a joint letter from the Texas Conference of the American Association of University Professors and the Texas chapter of the NAACP. The firings were first reported by the Austin American-Statesman, citing people familiar with the decision.

UT-Austin President Jay Hartzell said in an email Tuesday that the school was also disbanding the Division of Campus and Community Engagement, which provided support and resources for “those who may face the most significant challenges in accessing” education, according

to the department’s website. The AAUP and NAACP said about 40 of the people who were fired used to work in this department.

The changes aim to bring the university into fuller compliance with Senate Bill 17, a state law approved last year that bans DEI initiatives in public universities and went into effect in January.

“I recognize that strong feelings have surrounded SB 17 from the beginning and will shape many Longhorns’ perceptions of these measures,” Hartzell said in the email. “It is also important that this continues to be a welcoming, supportive community for all.”

Hartzell said student-facing services and jobs will be retained for the remainder of the semester. As for the staff members who were fired, he said employees can apply to other open positions at the university.

The AAUP and NAACP said they had “heightened concerns” about the layoffs because many of the employees who were fired had been recently reassigned to positions not related to DEI. The groups’ letter said they will “continue to accumulate information to address what we believe to be potential attacks on First Amendment Freedoms.”

The layoffs come as Texas colleges face increasing pressure to prove their compliance with SB 17. Last week, state Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, said in a letter to university leaders that colleges could lose millions in state funding if they fail to comply

with the law. Last month, Gov. Greg Abbott said more laws will be passed next legislative session to make sure schools are enforcing the DEI ban.

The ban represents “a fundamental shift in the operations of our higher education institutions” to ensure “a merit-based environment where every student, faculty and staff member can strive for and achieve personal excellence,” Creighton wrote in his letter.

The Senate Committee on Education is expected to hold a hearing in May on how the state’s universities are complying with the ban. Ahead

of the hearing, Creighton asked university leaders to provide information about how they were implementing it. One of the questions schools must answer is: “How has your institution ensured that there are no DEI offices or officers on campus, or no individual or organization performing the duties of a DEI office or officer?”

Earlier this year, some UT-Austin students said the university’s steps toward complying with the law

already felt like an overcorrection. Since the law went into effect, the university has closed down the school’s beloved multicultural center and discontinued a scholarship program for undocumented students.

Hundreds of students gathered Tuesday evening in three different locations across campus to discuss the closure of the DCCE. At the start of one of the meetings, organizers asked students if they were in an organization that was affected by the decision.

Some attendees responded they were with Longhorn TIES, a group for students who identify as neurodivergent, RGV Familia, composed of students from the Rio Grande Valley, and Women in STEM.

“I am one of the staff who was fired,” said one attendee who used to run a study abroad program for low-income students. “Although we’ve been fired, there’s still people on this campus who care about you, despite everything.”

The organizers went over ways students can stay informed and involved. They said plans in response to the university’s decision Tuesday would continue being ironed out.

“There are holes in all of our plans because we literally came up with this three or four hours ago,” an organizer said. “But let’s just do it. Full send.”



Students pass in front of the Jackson School of Geosciences and Gates-Dell Complex at the University of Texas at Austin on Feb. 22, 2024. Credit: Maria Crane/The Texas Tribune