

Opinion: Uncertainty for DEI programs

Columnists Amelia Watters, Matthew Jegers and Wren Warren-Jacobsen discuss the meaning and importance of DEI initiatives, and their uncertain future under the Trump administration.

Hello everyone, you're listening to In The Know, a podcast about the University of Minnesota. My name is Amelia, I'm a columnist at the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Daily, and today we are going to be talking about DEI initiatives on campus, especially in the wake of Trump's recent executive orders.

MATTHEW JEGERS: Hi, I'm Matthew, I'm also a columnist here at the Daily.

WREN WARNE-JACOBSEN: And hello, I'm Wren, I am also a columnist at the Daily.

WATTERS: So we're going to start off by sort of explaining what's been happening on campus because there's been a lot of information flying around. Not all of it is completely accurate. And Wren actually wrote our desk decision piece about the DEI initiatives and the pause and expansion that's been happening. So, yeah, she'll explain that for us.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Yeah, so a lot of uncertainty has been going around following the executive order by the Trump administration banning DEI in the federal government, and that has been affecting a lot of institutions receiving federal funding, including the University of Minnesota. So we've been explaining about how the University has been responding to that.

That has included a pause on expansion of DEI initiatives so far. There's been a pause for searching to hire a new dean of DEI at the law school. There has not, to our knowledge, been any rollbacks of current DEI programs, but there has been a pause and reconsideration of expanding programs from, from where we are now.

So, we've been looking at how that affects the University community. Well, people are thinking there's been a lot of frustration especially with the uncertainty of all these decisions. So we're hoping to get a little bit more clarity with all that.

JEGERS: And I think the University administration is also looking for a bit more clarity on what exactly is going to happen, especially in the wake of the NIH research grant cuts. You know, it's sort of a feeling of, oh gosh, what's next? What, what do we actually have to follow? What can we do in this situation to not lose, like, all of the funding we depend on?

WATTERS: And I think when we're talking about this, it's really important to make sure everyone has a firm understanding of what DEI actually is. Because I think for a lot of people, it's sort of become, like, this buzzword. DEI initiatives stand for diversity, equity, and

inclusion. Standards, right? Some people even add an A for accessibility, but these are standards that are striving for a more diverse and equitable campus to make sure that discrimination doesn't occur.

It says make sure that our students of color, our LGBT(Q+) students, our female students are safe and feel comfortable and fully accepted in this University. And I think it's really important that we say what DEI is and not pretend like they're just like YouTube videos that we have to watch in order to get our degree, right? Like, these are programs that are trying to protect students, and it is more than reasonable to be concerned at the prospect of those initiatives being rolled back.

JEGERS: Right, exactly. And I think an important thing to recognize when talking about DEI in general is there's been a lot of rhetoric on trying to position DEI as the opposite of meritocracy, when DEI is in fact a form of more equal meritocracy, more equitable, that's the E in DEI.

It's, yeah, it's trying to equate DEI, meaning the, like, hiring or promotion of people who aren't as skilled is just ludicrous. Sorry, I'll, I'll step off my soapbox a little bit.

WATTERS: No, you shouldn't apologize for that. Like I think that's totally accurate and like literally it's in the name. It's about equity and we can talk all we want about how we live in a meritocracy and these schools should be colorblind or gender blind or whatever. But the reality is that's not where our world is at, right?

We are still working through systemic barriers that have prevented women and Black people and LGBTQ+ people from getting an education historically, right? And we can't just pretend that that isn't the case.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's also easy to forget if you're not experiencing it firsthand. Then a lot of these people would have to be extremely overqualified to be considered for the same positions as more favored groups have been. So, the idea that DEI would just be leading to underqualified people being hired is really not representative of reality, and any effective DEI program would be opening more doors, making more opportunities available.

And so while maybe there are some programs that aren't effective, I definitely think some DEI programs have been used to just make it look on the outside that some organizations are promoting diversity. Those need to be addressed, absolutely. But banning DEI programs across the federal government, across educational institutions, is absolutely not the way to do that. That's going to cause more harm than good.

JEGERS: Absolutely. And I'm so glad that you brought that up because that to me the, I don't know what else to call it, but I'll call it DEI washing, or like diversity washing, because it's sort of similar to the concept of like queer capitalism where like during Pride Month, a

whole line of companies that don't necessarily, whose actions don't necessarily show that they are supporting LGBTQ(+) rights will roll out priced up Pride merch in order to try to profit from the movement.

It's the same thing with like, greenwashing and being environmentally conscious. So it's an interesting thing and it's a shame that often, not oftentimes, but a decent amount of DEI initiatives have been used as sort of a veneer to try to, I guess, stay in the political. Stay with political trends when it really should be used to make just a truly equitable and fair environment for work, school, et cetera.

WATTERS: Yeah, it definitely can feel extremely performative, especially when we saw how quickly Target was willing to bow to Trump's executive, or President Trump's, executive orders, right? It's we actually put out a poll recently, and a lot of people's concerns reflected this idea that these programs were dispensable for the University, right?

Like, that it came from sort of standing like straight within the Overton window of like what was acceptable and trending and like being seen as woke rather than like actually caring about creating a more diverse and equitable accessible and inclusive campus environment and I do think that is a real concern however, I also believe, and I believe this can these two things can be true at the same time, that there are genuine legal concerns when it comes to all of this, right?

Obviously, a federal judge is right now suing Donald Trump's for his executive order relating to pulling funding, saying that's an overreach of executive power. However, with as high profile as these cases are and how likely they are to set, like, massive precedent, it's not unreasonable to expect that a case like this could come before the Supreme Court.

And considering how the Supreme Court ruled regarding affirmative action just a few years ago, it's also not unreasonable to consider the fact that, like, DEI could just go away. As we understand it, if it gets to the Supreme Court and it goes 6-3 like Affirmative Action did, it's essentially over.

And so I do think a lot of universities are really frightened of that process of what could come from a law school and are more willing to just bow down and like, lower the prevalence of DEI programs or pause expansion in order to protect, like, what little DEI.

JEGERS: And I feel that the, everyone's going to be sort of watching the judiciary with very, very keen interest because the judicial system can be a bit of a wild card. Like I know like I say earlier in the Trump administration, but it's been a month. Some of his earliest initiatives, like the executive order trying to circumvent the 14th amendment and say birthright citizenship is not a policy, that was put on hold by a judge appointed by Ronald Reagan.

So, the point where, like jurists appointed by the, the father of sort of the modern GOP are even saying, "Hey, yeah, no, that's, that's illegal. That is very illegal." It really cements the point that no one knows what the judge, the judges or what the court system are actually going to do with vis-a-vis Trump's policies.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Absolutely. I think that's where a lot of the frustration is coming from right now. Both because universities don't know what's coming their way. So they're hesitant to act or not. It's just really unclear what their best move is at this point. But at the same time, communities, as you said, are saying that as communities are seeing that as they're dispensable or this isn't a top priority for the university.

And so we've seen a lot, a lot of disappointment among university community who's shared their opinions on this and saying, you know, this is, this should be a top priority for the university. It's dangerous to comply before you have any really concrete guidelines on this. So, I don't think really, nobody really knows what's best to do at this point, but at the same time, just sitting and waiting, I think has its own risks.

JEGERS: Right. And I think one of the sort of watershed examples of things that people will be watching in order to try to decide the fate of these programs are things like Trump's recent how should I say this, argument, conflict with the governor of Maine where the the president tried to call her out for her Association of Principals saying we're not going to abide by your executive order trying to pull transgender students from our state's sports.

And the main governor applying, Oh yeah, we'll see you in court if you try to withhold our federal funding. So it'll be issues like that, where I think a lot of these organizations, the University of Minnesota, especially will be watching to see if there are any actual punishments, if there's actual any stick to the threat.

WATTERS: Yeah, no, absolutely. Again, there's just a lot of uncertainty. Like, I think that's just going to be the name of the game for this podcast episode of everything's uncertain. We don't know what's going to happen. Right? But I think another layer of this frustration, right, is for a lot of progressive individuals.

There's been a ton of frustration with the sort of liberal elite or the Democratic Party in general, and their willingness to sort of for the sake of institutionalism, for the sake of maintaining, like a sense of prestige when it comes to the establishment, that they're not willing to stand up when it really matters.

And I think that's, like, adding to a layer, another layer of frustration there, right? Because we think of academia as Of very, very liberal institutions, which is often the case, I especially, we live in Minnesota, Minneapolis. I have no doubt that the majority of our mission administration probably identifies with progressive and progressivism, right?

But they can say that, but when it comes down to it, are they actually going to fight for creating a diverse and equitable campus? And for a lot of people right now, it seems like the answer might be no, and that is enormously frustrating.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Right, I mean, what does that say about values? Are we valuing students? Are we valuing diversity? But then, the question of funding. Funding is important, but where is that funding going, right? It's not guaranteed that that funding is going to go back to students and communities that have been underrepresented in education.

That funding might go into areas of the institution that already have money that, like, to an extent that is, they don't need, so more money for football games, more money for football games, a new football stadium, that's great, right?

JEGERS: This may be sacrilegious given that the Daily is like next door to Huntington Bank Stadium. So hopefully they don't hear it in, you know, charge in

WATTERS: Huntington is beautiful as it is, guys.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: It is beautiful as it is, you know?

WATTERS: Yeah.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: But I mean, if, if we're gonna get funding.

WATTERS: Oh, sorry. Oh, no, you're good. But that just sort of, like, goes back to some of our responses that we were getting. A lot of people were talking about how it, like, it'd be one thing if, like, this funding that the government was giving us was to fund women and sexuality women, gender, and sexuality programs, or Jewish studies, or other studies related to, like equity and underrepresented groups and studying and researching those groups and supporting those groups, but we need to be realistic here and, and say that it's probably not, that's probably not what this, these funding is going to. Yeah, and there's frustration to that as well.

JEGERS: Frustration, uncertainty, and adding to that even more uncertainty of, oh, what all funding is going to be cut is that even programs that are less directly related to DEI initiatives are being targeted by the administration. The first one that comes to mind is the grants for new special education teachers over at St.

Thomas that under the Biden administration had the application for that grant had to include, "oh how is this going to help diversity, equity, or inclusion?"

And then comes the Trump administration, they see, "Oh, something that is helping DEI, that gets cut." So 185 teachers are out of funding. So it's, it's always the uncertainty of, "Oh gosh, what is going to be pulled next?" Where are we going to feel the burn next, I guess.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Right. But then there's also the threat that was mentioned. Even if universities try to comply with this order to keep their funding there isn't necessarily a guarantee that the administration won't find another way to cut funding in the future.

I think that's one, one of the things unique to our current situation is you really don't know how far the administration is going to go.

So you could play it safe, protect funding, and end up right in the same situation with a different, a different reason. But then at the same time, Yeah, you don't know quite how you, it's hard to determine the strength of a reaction or retaliation, so. That will be something we have to wait and see.

JEGERS: Yeah. And, yeah, it'll be, certainly be interesting to try to see if these threats or if these punishments actually go through. And what because there's also like a whole, a bunch of conflict about pulling, potentially pulling funding that was congressionally allocated.

Which is gets into whole constitutionality and interpretations of Article 1. But anyways, not to go down too much of a rabbit hole, it'll be everyone's going to be watching the administration and its legal troubles in the coming months.

WATTERS: Yeah, again, like there is already a federal judge suing Donald Trump and his administration for these actions. I can't imagine that it's going to stop with one federal judge, especially with our own attorney general putting up lawsuits against the Donald Trump administration. Not for this, to my knowledge, but for the ban on transgender athletes in athletics. Like, we, the university just as we are really in the dark of whether any of these executive orders are actually going to make a meaningful difference.

Right? Because the reality is if we have any shred of separation of powers left in our democracy, I'm getting on my soapbox a little bit here, like, we don't, there's just simply no way that the president can just unilaterally just create legislation because that's what this is. This is 100% legislation that is happening from our executive branch. And, I, hopefully, our federal courts and our state courts will recognize that and put a stop to it.

JEGERS: And if I could hop on to your soapbox a little bit. It also comes down to like sort of the whole concept of discretionary funding because we normally, I say normally, but there is no normal world in politics, let's be real. But, in the past, we haven't really had this sort of conflict where the executive is pushing for these as massive as these cuts without Congressional approval.

I wouldn't even say congressional approval, congressional review even. Except for a few cases like the, the Medicaid cuts that were recently passed. But it's interesting and what's also interesting is the administration signaling that it will not abide by some judicial decisions.

I remember that with the USAID cuts after those were put on hold by, I believe that was another Reagan appointed judge, that Yeah, you, you can't do a full 100 percent cut of USAID the administration, we won't, we won't comply with this order. So, constitutional crisis might be on the horizon, I don't want to be too dumerous here, but, it'll be, yeah, I think that'll, this is the refrain that I'm going to keep repeating during this episode, but it'll be interesting.

WATTERS: Yeah, so now we're gonna go through some of the responses from students, administration, faculty that we got.

Are we just reading the, reading the

WARNE-JACOBSEN: responses? Yeah, we could just, like, read some interesting ones and So I'm not sure if we If they've, like, agreed to be posted, so I don't know if we, I feel like we should summarize. Yeah, we can just do that, yeah.

Don't use their name either. I

WARNE-JACOBSEN: can't even see the names.

WATTERS: Alright.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Yeah, so we got a lot of responses. Both with understanding the reason for a pause, and still not loving the situation we're in. But also, just disappointment with the situation in the university. There's been a lot put into DEI at the university. I think a lot of these people responding see that and wonder how it can stop or be reassessed so quickly.

And I want to reiterate that current programs haven't been paused. It's the expansion that's paused at the moment. But, but still, I think for a lot of people, any disruption with any part of DEI is a pretty red flag. And really creates a lot of worry and uncertainty for what is going to happen in the future. Especially with respect to the communities most affected by the initiatives. So, that's been reflected a lot in the opinions we've been hearing.

JEGERS: Yeah. And the, another interesting thing from the opinions is, goes sort of back to what we touched on earlier the, it reflecting this pause reflecting the fact that or the fact that many students feel that the administration's policies of DEI were that surface deep.

Not truly down to the, which, okay. But at the same time, the university's also between a rock and a hard place, given that it needs the funding to survive. So it's I don't know. I can see both sort of sides of it.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Yeah, I think there's also the acknowledgement that these initiatives might change on the outside, but what's really most important is what efforts are being taken to create a safe and inclusive space for everyone. So, if we don't call the initiatives DEI, for

example, as long as we're still making an effort to make the university a more accessible place.

I think that's what matters for a lot of the people who are sharing their opinions. But at the same time, that outer appearance of standing strong with DEI initiatives is also important. So, yeah, you want to keep being effective, but at the same time the symbol, the symbolism and the stance of staying strong can be very meaningful.

JEGERS: And I do hope that that sort of I don't know how to call it guerrilla inclusion of trying to fly under the radar with some of these DEI programs. I do hope that that's followed through. And I think it's important to note that if a culture or a space truly is embracing these initiatives, it's not something that can just be willed away.

It is some, the appreciation for diversity, equity, inclusion would be drilled into the, the core of the community, the, the hearts of the, the students and faculty. So I don't think it'll take a, or I don't think that an executive order or administrative policy can necessarily wipe that all away.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Yeah. I think that was an important part in our desk decision too. Trying to emphasize that the people in the university community are really what make this space more diverse, more equitable, more inclusive. The initiatives are very important, yes, but in this situation, the very least we can do is just make sure everyone, as individuals, are still doing our best to try to keep this commitment to making higher education more accessible for everyone, even if the way we have to do it changes. We can't just drop a ball.

WATTERS: Yeah, absolutely. Something I want to know is I've mentioned a couple times students for equitable admissions versus Harvey, which was the affirmative actions case. I may have gotten the title wrong, but that was the affirmative actions case from a couple terms ago which effectively overturned, like, basically stated that affirmative action was unconstitutional.

And yet, universities still have ways to make sure that our campus has, is equitable in terms of race and gender and stuff like that, right? Like it may just mean that the university has to go about it in a different way. Right, like they are with affirmative action. They are still trying to figure out a way to include race as a factor in admissions without including race as a factor in admissions, right?

Like, there are still people at the university who want to make sure that we are creating a diverse and equitable and inclusive campus.

And if that means we have initiatives that are called things that isn't DEI and we come up with a different name, or we have to reformat those initiatives and stuff like that. I don't think DEI is going to go away completely as we know it right now. I think that is highly unrealistic

again, especially considering how progressive most campus administration workers are, but it is important to acknowledge that.

It's still really scary. It's really scary that we're living in a world that is turning away from even pretending to care about diversity equity and inclusion right like because the reality is even rainbow capitalism or greenwashing and all of that is better than the alternative of companies being too scared to stand up for the rights of LGBTQ people and people of color and stuff like that.

So just remembering to have hope that there is still people that care is so, so important. And if that's the only thing people take away from this episode, I think just being there for each other, being kind to each other, supporting each other, standing up for injustice when they see, when we see it in our own personal lives, making sure we are keeping up to date with the news is so important. And yeah, just making sure we are Fostering a world that is equitable and inclusive, even if our university isn't necessarily telling us that directly.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Yeah, and really keeping in mind and following what's happening with education too. I mean, like we've discussed, DEI is not the only target being placed on universities right now.

There's research funding. There's the investigation over allegations of anti semitism.

There's affirmative action, and I think all of those things combined really show that targeting education is a, a really direct way to get at the heart of a society and to try and change the trajectory. of a society. And right now it is so important book bans. Another one.

JEGERS: The elimination of the Department of Education. Yeah.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: There we go. A big one. Yeah. Yeah. It's just, without education, it's so much easier to fall victim to leaders who are lying or being misleading, trying to just gain power for themselves. Right? When you have educated citizens, they're not going to get away with that as much. So, we really need to make sure we don't drop the ball on education. Education is really the cornerstone to making progress in a society.

WATTERS: Yeah, I think there's a reason that the biggest, first, most important desegregation case in the United States is Brown vs.

Board of Education. Education is where this starts. It is where we create communities of people and coalitions of people that care about each other, that understand each other's differences, and the inequities that still exist within our trade.

Within our world and are striving to be a better system and no matter what the President Trump administration tries to do to take that away from us, they cannot take away our education and our willingness to care about each other and learn from each other.

JEGERS: And just to add on to that, public education is also really so vital to our society. I love that you brought up Brown v. Board because I don't know if there's been as much of a mainstay or as, or as anything else that has been as important to the development of America as a modern society, as public education was. I, it's just so, such something that you become so used to and so I don't want to say coddled by, but so, so used to that the thought of it being undermined or the thought of it potentially going away is just inconceivable.

And so I feel that public education, whether that be the K-12 system or the U of M system, which is a bit more pricey, but it's still accessible for college standards. This is, should be one of our. the things that we are quickest to defend. Because, yeah, you both are right. This is one of the most important aspects of our society.

WATTERS: Yeah, absolutely. Do we have anything else we want to add? Or are we ready to wrap it up? Yeah, all right. Awesome. Thank you guys so much for listening. This is Amy, Wren and Matthew. Three of your columnists at the Minnesota Daily. You can read our columns at the MinnesotaDaily.com. I have no idea what I'm saying. Thank you so much for listening to In The Know a podcast about the University of Minnesota.

WARNE-JACOBSEN: Stay in the know.

JEGERS: Absolutely. Thank you guys.