

# Florida Atlantic University Faculty Statement on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the State University System of Florida

Adopted January 31, 2023

## Overview

Faculty at Florida Atlantic University celebrate and stand by the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives at our institution. We embrace the pedagogical value and societal importance of these practices, and would utilize them even without the direct and unqualified 2020 mandate by the Board of Governors to do so (see appendix A). These approaches have clear and demonstrated positive outcomes for students, faculty, and the community (see appendix B). Our successes, however, are threatened by attacks on Florida's educators which grow by the day (see appendix C). Collectively, we stand against any erosion of work related to DEI, as it would harm our students, our faculty, our community, and the ideals of education.

DEI initiatives are not the product of a "woke" ideology. DEI efforts can be found at every single Fortune 100 company including Amazon, Apple, Costco, GM, Home Depot, IBM, Target and Walmart, and many others, and at the most impactful non-governmental organizations in the world. Florida's universities are not an outlier or aberration in adopting DEI.

DEI strategies are a response to overwhelming data that show students have different starting places and different ways of integrating the experiences they have while at a university. In short, DEI is a student success strategy. Moreover, it is a strategy that responds to student demand and expectation.<sup>1</sup> As we continue evolving into a global society, an education based on a deep understanding of the essential value and unique nature of all peoples is fundamental to thriving and prospering at both the individual and societal levels. DEI work is critical to our students' success, both in their own lives and as members of the workforce.

## Call to Action

It is time that Florida's educators be allowed to return to the work to which they have dedicated their lives, free from the intimidation and fear that have recently become part of our daily landscape.

We urge our elected leaders to realize the damage these mischaracterizations and scare tactics are doing to the State, to the reputation of its institutions and to the morale of its world-class educators.

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<sup>1</sup> A Hanover Research report in 2022 found:

Diversity and equity priorities are important to a clear majority of students. Of a wide range of DEI-related priorities, ensuring a welcoming and safe environment for diverse students ranks highest. In addition, 88% of students consider it important for institutions to prioritize funding for programs and resources that support historically disadvantaged student subgroups and 90% agree it is important to increase recruitment and retention of faculty and staff of diverse backgrounds (2022 Higher Education, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Survey, Hanover Research, 12)

Florida is at an inflection point. To maintain the excellent trajectory of our institution and our top-ranked State university system, it is essential that educators be afforded the academic freedom to craft our student-serving initiatives.

To those ends, we encourage the people of Florida to call their representatives and to urge elected officials to ensure our higher educational endeavors can continue to evolve absent threats and bullying.

We invite business and community leaders, donors and patrons, industry and international partners, and concerned individuals everywhere to stand with us.

We ask that all alumni that hold a degree from a university in Florida, that every student currently attending a Florida SUS institution, and all of their family, friends and loved ones call their representatives to say “enough is enough”. Insist that your elected officials protect the value of the degree you’ve earned, or are working toward, by rejecting the implication that those degrees are anything other than the culmination of the best and most rigorous educational practices in the world.

Our message is clear: Education is too important to our students, to the people of Florida and to the future of our nation to be put at risk by political whim.

## Appendix A: Florida Board of Governors Directive

In the Fall of 2020, the SUS Florida BOG embraced DEI efforts as central to the advancement of the State and to the eradication of injustice. As they put it:

The Board of Governors, responsible for the management and operation of the State University System, affirms that our state university communities are influential voices in Florida and have the wisdom and leadership to make a difference in our nation's continuing efforts to end incidents of racism and societal injustice. ("Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Strategic Priorities", October 2020, 1).

The BOG also mandated DEI and established it as a central and strategic priority for the state university system. They recognized that DEI initiatives were essential to providing a cutting-edge and unparalleled education that provides students with the knowledge, critical thinking skills, resources and aptitude essential to thriving in a globalized world. To emphasize the importance of integrating DEI into the curriculum they mandated the practices become enshrined in every SUS institution's strategic plan and institutional mission.

....Board of Governors is making a clear and steadfast commitment to prioritize and support diversity, racial and gender equity, and inclusion in the State University System and to hold each university accountable for policies, programs, and actions that will codify and operationalize the System's commitment. The Board will regularly collaborate with university administrators, students, and faculty on DEI initiatives and will provide: (a) clear expectations for specific, measurable outcomes; (b) opportunities to come together to learn and share best practices; and (c) connections to national DEI leaders to advance SUS initiatives ("Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Strategic Priorities", October 2020, 1).

....university's strategic plan and mission statement, should prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion and provide clear direction for the total integration of DEI initiatives throughout the institution. ("Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Strategic Priorities", October 2020, 4).

As the BOG rightly understood, DEI efforts are an essential mechanism through which universities can deliver on their promise to promote the public good by ensuring that the best trained experts, utilizing constantly evolving best practices, are brought to bear on the societal challenges, inequities and needs of our era. As they put it:

Moving forward, work on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as Strategic Priorities must not be a "check the box and move on" activity. To produce meaningful and sustainable outcomes, this challenging work will need to continue long after our urgent responses to the crises of 2020 are completed, as diversity, equity, and inclusion will need to be identified as critical priorities within the mission of each of our 12 state universities. Workgroup members confirmed that the diversity, equity, and inclusion landscape in the SUS is not barren as there are many active and productive DEI professional staff and programs in place. In the short term, university-wide efforts should continue to focus on and provide the conditions necessary for all campus members to feel welcomed, supported, and valued by all in the community. Regarding long-term D.E.I planning, the critical goal will be to continually improve each university's preparedness, transparency, performance, and sustainability. The SUS Workgroup on Diversity,

Equity, and Inclusion believes that the State University System is a strong and influential voice in Florida and urges the students, faculty, staff, and alumni at each of the 12 universities to actively engage in finding solutions peacefully to eliminate racism, end inequities, and promote social justice (“Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Strategic Priorities”, October 2020, 6).

Charged with this directive and proud of being the most diverse institution in the SUS system, FAU enthusiastically embarked on multiple initiatives throughout the university. These initiatives have led to tremendous success as more fully discussed in Appendix B.

## Appendix B: Florida Atlantic University Initiatives and Accomplishments

The faculty at FAU fully support and embrace the BOG's establishment of DEI as a strategic priority. We are justifiably proud of FAU's DEI initiatives and of the faculty's role in creating, participating in and advancing those initiatives. Our efforts have been recognized, many times, as an exemplary national model for the integration of DEI and student success, and no amount of politically motivated spin can obscure the tremendous successes we have achieved.

In April of 2021, a report based on an FAU Academic Affairs survey included the following:

- Every academic college reported substantial DEI activities. These activities include:
  - professional development training
  - workshops on best practices on engaging diverse communities
  - strategic hiring initiatives to address gaps in our educational delivery
  - adjustments to mentoring practices
  - enhancements to campus life
  - enriched curricular and co-curricular activities
- Our DEI successes also include:
  - authoring numerous books
  - publishing hundreds of peer-reviewed research articles
  - delivering thousands of professional, scholarly presentations at some of the most prestigious academic and public venues in the world.
- Our faculty have won awards for their work studying inequities throughout the world as well as for their scholarship and pedagogical contributions toward understanding the differential nature of learning.
- We have received millions of dollars in donations and in grants for our DEI work, including multiple awards from the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH)
- We have educated thousands of students who, as a result, are more aware of the rich diversity of our world, that will be more adroit at successfully navigating its complexities and who will be more likely to thrive in an increasingly global workforce.

In addition, FAU has received numerous accolades, honors and awards as a direct result of our D.E.I initiatives, including:

- The Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities 2022 Degree Completion Award
- FAU more than doubled its four-year graduation rate from 19.3% in 2014 to 49.8% in 2021. Most noteworthy, the graduation rates for students who identify as Black/African American or Hispanic/Latinx, as well as those who are Pell-eligible are higher than the overall graduation rates
- Most Diverse University in Florida SUS system as noted by U.S. News and World Report (multiple years)
- Diverse: Issues In Higher Education magazine as a top producer of bachelor's and master's degrees for minority students. On the Top 100 list for all disciplines combined, FAU's rankings include:
  - 17 for African Americans with bachelor's degrees
  - 40 for Hispanics with bachelor's degrees

- 51 for African Americans with master's degrees
- 53 for Hispanics with master's degrees
- 44 for total minority students with bachelor's degrees
- 60 for total minority students with master's degrees
- Ranked by U.S. News and World Report #41 - Top Performers on Social Mobility
- Recognized as a "Hispanic Serving Institution" by the U.S. Department of Education and Top 40 Degree Producer for Hispanics
- Higher Education Excellence in Diversity Award Recipient (2021, 2022)
- Member of the Age-Friendly University (AFU) Global Network

It is important to note that FAU has been fiscally responsible in this work, having spent \$900,000 in total dollars of which \$640,000 came from E&G funds during the 2021-2022 academic year. These numbers represent less than 1% of our total and E&G budgets, respectively, and they indicate a significant return on investment given the recognition for FAU, grant funding awarded, and the positive impact to students.

In sum, we deliver a top-tier education in a cost-effective manner using practices embraced by nearly every respected institution, business and non-profit organization in the world.

## Appendix C: Threats to a World Class Education System

Despite the BOG's DEI mandate, and seemingly without concern for the successes we have achieved or the harm their discourse and actions might inflict, Florida's universities have increasingly become a target of political attack by some. Recently, the SUS has been inundated with data requests from various political figures seeking, among other things, a listing of specific DEI-related courses as well as a list of those faculty and staff that work on DEI initiatives. Days ago, we received an additional request for the names of individuals serving on DEI committees. Those colleagues have been commanded to submit any and all communications related to their efforts, including text exchanges that may have taken place on private cell phones. One cannot but see the echo of history's most egregious governmental overreaches in these actions.

We have every reason to expect that this oversight will worsen. These recent requests signal a chilling escalation of political interference in our efforts, one that threatens our ability to deliver our core educational mission for our students. The mischaracterizations of DEI risks stifling educational achievement, workforce readiness and degree completion gains that have been made at FAU and throughout the Florida system.

Should this continue, students will find attending a university a less compelling career pathway. The addition of DEI has helped Florida attract top students and faculty creating wide ranging opportunities for Florida residents. Indeed, If Florida becomes known as a state where politics guides our higher education policy it will lead to a less competitive workforce. The environment will become less conducive to attracting business, industry, trade, media, entertainment, and technology leaders that see this state as the site of the best trained and most skilled workers and as a state capable of delivering the most important inventions, advances and opportunities for the future. The end result will be lost research dollars, lost grants, and a significant loss of the best faculty and students to institutions outside the state.

The increasing intrusion into university affairs threatens our most vulnerable faculty and staff, many of whom moved to this state in good faith on the promissory note offered by our BOG that we would vigorously pursue DEI efforts throughout our institutions. Crucially, many of the faculty that serve in DEI roles are junior faculty or recently hired employees. Disproportionately, they are also more likely to be Black, indigenous or persons of color.

Within the short time since the BOG DEI directive, the officials have mandated the following:

- Laws that invite cameras into our classrooms in order to monitor our activities
- Restrictions on our speech and ability to deliver classroom instruction
- Threats of lawsuit or employment termination if any student is discomfited by our teaching
- Repeated limitations on the protections of tenure and the commitment to academic freedom, the twin pillars of higher education that for much of our history have been the catalysts for American innovation and invention.

These efforts tarnish the value of the degrees held by every graduate of a Florida institution by the suggestion that the education they received was anything but the best and most rigorous possible.

The Faculty of Florida Atlantic University invites State leaders to partner with us in improving the university system in Florida. Those doing so in good faith adopt an approach that works with educators by dialoguing with us on research practices and our pedagogical efforts. Some, however, have clearly chosen a more self-serving path; a path less effective for our students and for our economy. It is this path that we invite every citizen of Florida and every concerned individual throughout the world to stand with us and reject.