

‘What we need now is leadership’: Northeastern faculty voice alarm over Trump administration DEI restrictions, threats to funding

Hundreds of faculty members attend Jan. 29 faculty senate meeting following DEI backpedaling

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More than 430 faculty members sat in on a Jan. 29 faculty senate meeting, expressing confusion and concern following a series of federal executive orders that threaten research and diversity initiatives at Northeastern and colleges and universities across the country.

Faculty members were most concerned about the future of diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, programs at Northeastern. Since President Donald Trump took office Jan. 20, he has signed dozens of executive orders, generating widespread confusion and fear in the higher education landscape. In particular, a Jan. 21 [executive order](#) instructed federal officials to investigate “illegal” DEI programs. The plan threatens DEI programs at institutions of higher education with endowments over \$1 billion, which [includes Northeastern](#) and more than 15 other New England [institutions](#).

In response to the order, the university [quietly changed](#) nearly all of its DEI messaging and websites, including the main Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion website, The Huntington News reported Jan. 28. In its place is a [“Belonging at Northeastern”](#) webpage, which features two paragraphs with sparse information. The original website was active as recently as Jan. 24. As of Jan. 30, none of the university’s leaders have directly communicated anything regarding Trump’s executive orders or the institutional changes to the student body at large.

“Northeastern’s commitment to embracing our entire global community remains steadfast,” Vice President for Communications Renata Nyul wrote in a statement to The News. “While internal structures and approaches may need to be adjusted, the university’s core values don’t change. We believe that embracing our differences — and building a community of belonging — makes Northeastern stronger.”

During the 11:45 a.m. virtual senate meeting, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs David Madigan fielded questions from faculty about how to protect federal funding, though most of the conversation revolved around DEI.

Early into the meeting, Madigan introduced Richard O’Bryant, Northeastern’s chief belonging officer, to address the hundreds of faculty at the meeting.

“I want to assure everybody that that’s not changing the work that we do and the commitment that we have as an institution,” O’Bryant said of the name change to Office of Belonging. “The values that are spelled out in our [academic plan](#) are still very much our guiding principles.”

Assistant professor of physics Johan Bonilla Castro, who is nonbinary, said they attended the meeting to advocate for Northeastern community members who are transgender or gender-non-conforming. Data on LGBTQ+ students at Northeastern — previously listed in the

university's annual [Diversity and Equity Survey Report](#) and published by the DEI office — are no longer accessible on the Office of Belonging website.

“My primary reason for being here and my job today is not the lovely physics that I can do, ... it's that there's no representation of me,” they said. “And now that I'm here, I feel left aside. I do not feel like I belong.”

Bonilla Castro, who recently visited [Northeastern's Miami](#) campus, said they encountered difficulty when trying to pick a bathroom given Florida's strict [anti-transgender law](#), which requires that individuals use the restroom or changing facility designated for their sex assigned at birth. Bonilla Castro said they asked the university's staff in Miami which bathroom they should use, and whether Northeastern would support them if they were in the wrong bathroom according to Florida law, and “the answer was, ‘I don't know.’”

“I understand their positions and being scared [of retaliation], but I'm the target, so what is Northeastern doing to protect me? At the moment, it seems like nothing,” Bonilla Castro said.

Bonilla Castro emphasized the importance of communication as a form of action and said they hope their story sends a message to the broader Northeastern community.

Around the 45-minute mark, Dee Spencer and Heidi Kevoe-Feldman — who are the secretary and the chair of the Senate Agenda Committee, respectively — supported tabling the two items on the Jan. 29 agenda in favor of allowing more time for discussion on DEI and federal funds.

Alby Ramirez-Mendez, director of major gifts at Bouvé College of Health Sciences, spoke about the “troubling reality” of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, raids, which the Trump administration has threatened to carry out [in several sanctuary cities nationwide](#). Ramirez-Mendez asked what Northeastern is doing to ensure minority community members “feel safe being on campus and walking across campus every day.”

“It is possible that we could have ICE people come to campus or interactions of one sort or another. The correct thing to do is to call General Counsel immediately. And we'll provide as much support as we can,” Madigan said, referring to the [Office of the General Counsel](#).

Throughout the meeting, faculty members sought advice on navigating the rapidly-changing threats to research funds. The U.S. Office of Management and Budget, or OMB, announced in a [memo](#) Jan. 27 that all federal funds and grants would freeze, which [it rescinded](#) two days later.

However, White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in a Jan. 29 [X post](#) that rescinding the memo did not indicate a “rescission” of a federal funding freeze, leaving the future of federal funding unclear. While it is not abnormal for incoming administrations to review federal spending, Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), chair of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, [called the OMB's memo](#) “far too sweeping.”

Kevoe-Feldman said the deans of each college met recently to discuss what the [executive order](#) would entail for research funded by grants before OMB rescinded the memo. Thereafter, the deans sent letters to the faculty in their respective colleges.

In an email sent to College of Science faculty Jan. 27 obtained by The News, faculty were instructed to continue to submit grant proposals by their deadlines and pay particular attention to whether diversity plan requirements are being amended. The email also advised faculty to document all interactions with federal agencies regarding grant submissions to mitigate potential confusion and payment delays.

“What we need now is leadership,” Kevoe-Feldman said in an interview with The News. “And I think that our senior leadership is aware of that, and they’re going to do everything that they can to keep everybody informed and give clear instruction.”

Madigan assured faculty that the university would publish an FAQ website, in which further questions about any topics related to recent applicable executive orders would be answered or clarified. The FAQ site, which is “intended to share real-time information about these impacts [of executive actions] and the university’s response,” was [published](#) Jan. 30 on Northeastern Global News, the university-run media outlet.

Chancellor and Senior Vice President for Learning Ken Henderson, who was also in attendance, said an FAQ is the best way for university administration to deliver information in developing situations, a tactic the university has employed before, including during the [COVID-19 pandemic](#).

However, several faculty members asked the university to provide further comment. Kris Manjapra, a professor of history and global studies, suggested that relying on an FAQ to address concerns demonstrated complacency to the Trump administration.

“In studies of fascism, we all know that there’s a tendency to work towards the leader and that we tend to see innovations that come from different sides,” Manjapra said. “Often that might lead to retaliation, might lead to new kinds of policy developments that may not even necessarily only come from Washington. And so, because of that, I am concerned about what this does to our disciplines, not just to DEI, especially if things begin to innovate in a more fascist direction.”

Manjapra asked that Madigan prepare a “statement of reaffirmed values” highlighting the principles upheld by the Northeastern community. Some values suggested by Manjapra included commitments to social validity, scientific inquiry, creativity, freedom of imagination and ethical reflection.

Camille Gómez-Laberge, an associate professor of physics, said there is value in a “bottom-up” message and asked, “Could you give a message of support to your faculty, to your esteemed

colleagues, to your students, just to let them know that these are difficult times, and we should stick together.”

Justin Mellette, a faculty senator for the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, said he believes students would appreciate a statement of reaffirmed values from one of the institution’s leaders. Mellette referenced a March 2021 [statement](#) from Northeastern President Joseph E. Aoun in which he condemned the spa shootings in Atlanta that killed eight people, sparking fear over anti-Asian violence.

“My students remember messages from President Aoun about the Atlanta spa shootings several years back,” Mellette said. “They remember that, and I had class discussion two hours ago with students who are wondering, where is this coming from? Where is this support coming from internally?”

Trash pile

- “History has shown us many times that the success of an individual, the important work that we do, it's not based on their identity group, it's based on their support group,” Gómez-Laberge said. “We need to support each other, stand together, work together and affirm our solidarity to get through this, which could very well just be the beginning of a storm.”
- He added that, “But what I'm trying to communicate to folks is that we all are going to help define this and that. There's no easy answers in the midst of all that we're going through.” o'bryant
- However, since its initial statement following the Oct. 7 attacks, the university has not issued any statements on events.
- “I understand some of this may be folded into a FAQ, but especially with students in mind, our students who are going to be going to that FAQ [for information], let us remember how to reach them,” Mellette said. “Yes, all of us individual faculty members can do that, but it can't just be [us] standing up at the start of class every day [to update them]. They also want in. They are asking [to hear] this from the top down, in addition to ... from us as faculty members who they see on the ground.”

[All notes and interview transcripts can be accessed here.](#)