

The SB 129 Bill Could Regress the University of Alabama's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Progress

By Schuyler Noordhoff

TUSCALOOSA, Ala.—Teachers and students from the University of Alabama express their concern for the effects of the SB 129 bill passed by Alabama Legislature. This bill was introduced Feb. 20, 2024 and was signed into law a month later on March 20, 2024. The SB 129 bill—also known as the “Anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion bill”—will prohibit public universities from funding DEI (Diversity Equity Inclusion) events, remove sponsoring from all DEI programs, and prohibit teachers from advocating for divisive concepts including those related to race, sex, and religion beginning Oct. 1, 2024.

The SB 129 synopsis reads: “This bill [will] prohibit certain public entities, including state agencies, local boards of education, and public institutions of higher education, from maintaining a diversity, equity, and inclusion office or department or sponsoring any diversity, equity, and inclusion program or program that advocates for a divisive concept. This bill [will] prohibit certain public entities from promoting, endorsing, or requiring affirmation of or certain divisive concepts relating to race, sex, or religion.”

As the text of the bill is vague, its direct implications are difficult to discern, but it signals to students that their unique identities will not be properly valued in the upcoming year. The University of Alabama has teams of people working diligently to interpret the text in order to move forward in planning what DEI will look like on campus next year.

While the state of Alabama has a historic past of racism, the University of Alabama has DEI programs to promote experiences including the Hallowed Grounds tour and the DEI

passport program to educate students on the history of inequality at the university and open their eyes to new perspectives for the future.

Counts Shanks, a sophomore at the University of Alabama, believes "DEI programs [are] a positive step forward" because "without education history repeats itself." Shanks firsthand saw the benefits of the DEI passport program as she became DEI certified through the resources provided within the program.

The passing of this bill removes all state funding from these programs.

John Klosterman, a full-time instructor in the Department of Art and Art History argued that this bill addresses a "problem that [was] invented rather than an actual issue."

Klosterman believes the bill is targeted against a minority group in order sustain a power structure rather than solving a problem that was truly hurting the state and the schools within the state.

Many people across campus hold similar views on the subject. Throughout interviews people had nothing but positive things to say about the DEI programs provided on campus. The lack of funding from the government will make it harder for these programs to continue.

Not only do many professors disagree with what the bill stands for, but many are concerned for the effects it may have on the students within the school.

Dr. Amy Pardo, a professor within the English Department, is "mostly concerned with how [SB 129] will affect her students in how they think about who they are in the world."

Apart from the political disagreements that could be made about the bill, there is a common concern for the identities of students—particularly minority groups—being overlooked.

Since the bill is not yet in action, students and teachers speculate how the school will respond next year.

Aubrei Grisaffe, the Vice President for DEI at the University of Alabama, believes “good will come from the trials [SB 129] poses and we will ultimately see a campus where DEI values prevail and flourish.” Grisaffe argues that “no bill can destroy” the values which DEI emphasizes including empathy and understanding.

While there is still uncertainty on how SB 129 will affect the University of Alabama, the passion of the people within the school cannot be controlled by a bill. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are efforts found within the hearts of people and not the money which funds the programs.

SB 129 synopsis link:

<https://alison.legislature.state.al.us/files/pdffdocs/SearchableInstruments/2024RS/SB129-int.pdf>