

New U. Arizona DEI requirement hit with criticism: 'academically unserious'

Ellie Cameron - Clarendon College - June 27, 2024

As universities nationwide scale back diversity, equity and inclusion policies, Arizona's flagship public institution is preparing to implement a new mandate for students -- two courses with a DEI emphasis as a graduation requirement.

Through the two courses, students will focus on themes of diversity, power, equity, privilege, oppression and marginalization, learn "how historical and contemporary populations have experienced inequality," and "theorize how to create a more equitable society," the university's website [states](#).

"...Classes with the Diversity & Equity Attribute will focus on issues such as racism, classism, sexism, ableism, imperialism, colonialism, transphobia, xenophobia, and other structured inequities," the university states.

The DEI mandate is part of a general education curriculum update at the University of Arizona and [takes effect](#) in fall 2026. In the meantime, it has prompted criticisms from a high-profile conservative think tank in the state.

Students "will be forced to take courses with academically unserious content that adds nothing to their education," Timothy Minella, a researcher with the Goldwater Institute, told The College Fix.

Minella authored the institute's report criticizing the DEI mandate. Published this month, it [argues](#) "general education programs were originally intended to help students gain knowledge and skills essential for thoughtful citizenship and successful careers."

But the new DEI requirements "instead promote politically activist ideologies to a captive audience of students, who must complete the programs in order to receive a degree," it adds.

Susan Miller-Cochran, professor of English and executive director of UA's general education, said the courses are in response to an Arizona Board of Regents policy "to contribute to a society that values 'equality under the law, diversity, inclusion, and constructive dialogue through civil discourse.'"

She said she strongly disagrees with the institute's report.

"It's about reflection and theorization. Understanding theories about diversity and equity, and to cultivate habits of mind that help to meet the requirements that the Arizona Board of Regents gave us in their general education policy," she told The College Fix in a telephone interview.

The Goldwater report was the result of a wide-ranging public records act request from last fall, and it picks apart several courses that meet the DEI focus after obtaining about 1,000 pages of syllabi.

Among the classes it highlights is one that requires students to “live like a bug” in “ENTO 160D1: Busy Bees and Fancy Fleas: How Insects Shaped Human History.” In one assignment, students will create “tissue paper wings” to understand the experience of “immigrants” or people “from a different social class.”

Minella told The Fix that UA students “could graduate having ‘lived like a bug,’ but without learning about the Constitution, the Civil War, or landmark Supreme Court cases.”

“This isn’t just bad policy. It’s a blatant violation of a clear directive to educate students in American civics from the [Arizona Board of Regents](#), the body that oversees Arizona public universities,” he said via email.

Another DEI class highlighted in the report is an anthropology one called “Race, Ethnicity, and the American Dream.”

“Racism is deeply embedded in US history, society, and institutions. It is systemic,” the syllabus states. “You’ll learn [in] this unit that racism is a system of advantage, and disadvantage, based on race. White people hold unearned privilege while people of color have not had equal access to the ‘American Dream.’”

Another DEI class includes “Constructions of Gender,” where students have the opportunity to participate in a “Safe Zone Training” through the campus LGBTQ center for extra credit.

Minella called the courses “emblematic of the broader academic failings” of the DEI requirement.

Mieczyslaw Zak, a spokesman for the university, said Minella did not discuss the courses with UA scholars and his report misses the mark.

“The goal is absolutely not activism,” he said. “The goal is understanding, so that students can develop their own perspective and decide how they want to move forward.”

Zak and Miller-Cochran also said they disagree the general education requirement runs afoul of board of regents policy. They said the regents acknowledged their curriculum policy does not provide a specific list of courses, and leaves the decision to the state universities.

Asked about the entomology course highlighted in the Goldwater report, Miller-Cochran said “I’m not an entomologist.”