

NAME: Vivien Ayers

HEADLINE: ‘Already so far behind’: University students reflect, express concern over future of environmental fields under Trump administration

The first day of class at the University of North Texas is the same as many colleges across the state, regardless of the year or location. Students bustle across campus, hurrying to make it to class on time, and professors prepare their curriculum for the onset of homework and lectures.

In an ecology laboratory full of dozens of students, an eager yet hesitant college sophomore waits for her professor to walk in. It’s Emma Land’s first introduction to ecology — taken on a whim for course credit — but it’s an encounter that lasts with her past the course’s final exam. Through the assignments, the plant assessments and bird counts, she discovered her passion for the environment and found her future career in conservation.

Two years later, Land is less than a month away from graduation with a degree in geography concentrating on environmental studies. She, along with her peers, are wrapping up their final papers — research essays on topics like weather forecasts, precipitation tracking, biodiversity conservation. These papers operate not just as proposals for funding grants but as testaments to the education the students have spent the past few years paying a hefty tuition for.

These degrees are the graduates’ promise to share their knowledge about the environment, one they intend to keep — at least until their professor instructs them to avoid using certain words. Phrases like “diversity, equity and inclusion” or “environmental justice,” which both recognize the disproportionate effects minority communities face when it comes to climate change.

These words act as warning symbols in the eyes of a federal government that has started intensely targeting topics viewed as polarizing since the inauguration of President Donald Trump on Jan. 20. These restrictions not only prevent research on certain topics from being released, Land said, but also censors researchers from investigating issues critical to the environment.

“We’re going to see a lot more of having to use specific wording, especially in research papers,” Land said. “It’s a lot more (about) not being able to say the big, scary words that people hear and (see it as) a political issue, when it’s really a word that is very necessary to use.”

When President Joe Biden took office in 2021, he designated environmental justice, along with mitigating the effects of environmental pollution, as a priority. A little over a year into his term, he signed the Inflation Reduction Act into law, marking the largest investment in environmental justice in American history, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. While the Democratic Party praised the act, the Republican Party opposed it, with a member of the [U.S.](#)

[House Committee on Appropriations calling](#) Republican bills targeting the act “direct attacks” on the climate.

In 2024, the [White House reported](#) that the act lowered the cost of clean energy for 3.4 billion Americans and increased access to this energy for households with lower incomes. These changes also significantly reduced the effects and production of carbon pollution for the next seven years, especially in lower-income areas, the government said.

On Jan. 20, President Donald Trump returned to office. The same day, he [signed an executive order](#) that would “unleash” American energy by investigating Biden administration acts focusing on clean energy and the environment — his first order in the White House.

Less than 100 days into his term, the Environmental Protection Agency revoked some of the Biden-era initiatives in what the agency [called the “greatest and most consequential” deregulatory](#) act in American history.

The federal government did not just deregulate the environment but also froze research funds for it. Since the beginning of Trump’s term, Lee Zeldin, the Environmental Protection Agency administrator, has cancelled over \$2 billion worth of contracts and grants for research investigating environmental justice and diversity, equity and inclusion. The agency’s website detailing the timeline of the country’s history with [environmental justice](#) has also been removed.

“The American people deserve accountability and responsible stewardship of their hard-earned tax dollars,” Zeldin said in a [news release announcing the funding freezes](#). “At President Trump’s direction, (the) EPA, with the assistance of (the Department of Governmental Efficiency), are reviewing every dollar spent. There will be zero tolerance for waste and abuse, and by canceling these contracts, we are delivering nearly \$60 million in immediate savings to the American people.”

However, these shifted environmental priorities are not just changing the playing fields for active researchers and environmentalists, but influencing and worrying current students like Land who are about to graduate college and enter the workforce.

David Spence, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin specializing in energy regulation who published a book focusing on environmental polarization, said these changes are a “product of the politics of today” and a lack of communication along the waves of the political spectrum.

“The modern media environment is what's sustaining a lot of the negative partisanship we see right now,” Spence said. “By negative partisanship, I mean the sense of attachment to one's party

as a way of stopping the other party and expressively opposing the other party and what it stands for.”

Part of this change, Spence said, boils down to a widespread sense of misinformation surrounding knowledge of the environment, which he, in part, attributes to the modern-day media. With the internet now allowing for the quicker dispersion of information, Spence said it’s easier for facts to become misconstrued and lost in the bigger picture of politics and the corresponding media coverage.

Graduates and current students of higher education institutions are commonly associated with more liberal viewpoints and values, according to a recent study from the [National Institutes of Health](#). The populations of urban areas are also more likely to hold liberal perspectives, while rural areas are more likely to lean conservative, the [Pew Research Center](#) found. Because of these facts, Spence said universities and colleges are being targeted by the government to “rebalance the narrative.”

“They’re doing this not because Exxon Mobil slipped money into their pocket, but rather because they believe, or at least the voters they’re catering to, believe that universities are liberal indoctrination institutions where people can’t get reasonable portrayals of conservative points of view,” Spence said. “They feel as though they’re intervening.”

The trickle-down effects of these interventions are felt on multiple fronts at institutes of higher education. Both the University of North Texas and the University of Texas at Austin host a wide range of environmental science labs and research opportunities. The National Institutes of Health currently funds [20 projects at UNT worth \\$7 million](#) and [326 projects at UT amounting to \\$148 million](#) — much of which is at risk following Trump administration funding cuts specifically targeting environmental justice, according to [Nature](#).

These cuts, while detrimental to current research, have the potential to create even more devastating consequences for future projects. Akanksha Mehta, an environmental sciences sophomore with a concentration in biology at UT Austin, said her and fellow students are already seeing the effects on academia and internship opportunities. While the full effects of the federal government’s actions are still unknown, especially with three full years remaining in Trump’s term, she said students still remain optimistic about the future environmental fields.

“It’s something that you genuinely care about and you’re passionate about, then I wouldn’t let kind of that outside noise discourage you from your passions and what you want to gain knowledge about and what you want to come to school for, because there’s always going to be opportunities,” Mehta said. “You may have to change your lifestyle a little bit to align with

what's available in the future, but there's always going to be an opportunity to fight for what you believe in.”