



The State of Higher Education at Florida's Public Universities:

Concerns & Consequences



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	i
The Effects of Recent Legislation on Governance in Florida Universities	1
Impact of Florida Legislation on Faculty.....	15
Government Interference in the Control of Curricula in State Universities.....	33
Investigating the Impact of Anti-DEI Legislation on Florida’s University Students.....	44
How has Anti-DEI Legislation Impacted Florida’s University Libraries?.....	57
Final Thoughts.....	69

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Executive Summary

Since 2022, Florida legislators and postsecondary governing bodies have enacted a series of laws and regulations focused on the State University System of Florida, the group of twelve universities governed by the Florida Board of Governors.

To better understand how recent regulation has impacted the universities, members of the Education Action Team of the League of Women Voters of Florida (LWVFL) and the Policy Committee of the American Association of University Women in Florida (AAUW-FL) examined impact on governance, curriculum, faculty, students, and libraries. We organize this report into five sections, each of which provides background information on a specific topic in terms of its history and national context, recent legislative and regulatory activity in Florida impacting the area, the nature of the impact, reasons for concern, consequences of the legislation that are already apparent, and recommendations. We conclude our report with a series of recommendations for the future. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive overview that can be used by legislators, administrators, journalists, and the public to understand the impact of government actions and make informed decisions about the future.

Both LWV and AAUW have a long history of advocacy for high quality education. The roots of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) are in [higher education](#) (AAUW, n.d.a). In 1881, a small group of alumnae from New England colleges met in Boston to discuss both women's access to higher education and opportunities for women with college degrees. The next year they were joined by another group of alumnae to form The American Collegiate Association, which became the American Association of University Women after merging with the Southern Association of College Women in 1921. A tradition of supporting research by women dates to 1883, with a grant to a scholar of Native American history. The history of research reports by AAUW starts with an 1885 statistical study in conjunction with the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, which demonstrated that college attendance did not impair women's health and fertility.

Today, AAUW has built up a considerable [endowment](#) for awarding graduate fellowships to women (AAUW, n.d.b.), making it the oldest non-institutional major funder of graduate education for women. Most of these fellowships are open to women in any field, but favor applicants either in STEM fields or those conducting research into gender equity issues. Various fellowship programs for dissertation completion, special research, postdoctoral research, and master's degrees in fields with low female participation are open to either American or international applicants.

Every two years, AAUW's Public Policy [Principles and Priorities](#) (AAUW, n.d.c) are revised by the Association (national) Public Policy Committee, submitted to the national Board of Directors, and finally voted on by the membership. AAUW's 2025-2027 Federal Action Priorities are focused on reducing barriers for women in higher education. These include 1) reinstating Title IX rules that protect sexual harassment and assault survivors, pregnant and parenting students, and gender diverse students; 2) providing for manageable student debt; and 3) addressing non-tuition barriers such as paid leave, childcare, and access to contraception and abortion care. In addition, the Priorities call for ensuring that the higher education “the environment and curriculum is inclusive, and free from political, religious, or cultural bias” (AAUW, n.d.c, para 21).

AAUW’s 2025 [Strategic Plan](#), (AAUW n.d.d) announced in May 2025, incorporates both the public policy and the graduate funding themes. In response to recent Federal assaults on higher education, AAUW has established a targeted [Defend Higher Education Fund](#) (AAUW, n.d.e.) to help provide for actions to counter recent assaults on equity and access for women in higher education.

Although the League of Women Voters is most often associated with advocacy for voting rights, examination of the organizations’ long history shows its close connection to and concern for high quality education at all grade levels. When the League of Women Voters was founded more than 100 years ago, one of its premises then and that continues today is that an educated citizenry is essential for democracy to thrive. The League has acknowledged throughout its history that such a citizenry relies on the free flow of information, mechanisms to hold leaders accountable, and healthy civic discourse. Support for high quality public education continues to be a feature of the League of Women Voters of Florida’s advocacy program.

By 2023, it had become evident to the League of Women Voters of Florida that legislators were driven to change the state’s publicly funded universities in much the same way they were instituting changes in its public schools. Anti DEI legislation such as [SB266](#) and policies/ regulations that followed from these bills dominated. Curriculum changes eliminated entire programs and individual courses that would have allowed students and professors to critically examine the intersections of race, class, gender with discrimination and disadvantage.

In response to the legislation, at the June 2023 League of Women Voters of Florida Convention, delegates approved changing the focus of one of its education issues so as to read *Promote diversity and nondiscrimination based on race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, citizenship, socio-economic status and ability status in all publicly funded schools, [including publicly funded colleges and universities](#)*. This clarifying change confirmed that The League of Women Voters of Florida would not ignore legislative changes to the state’s public higher education system.

The 2023 legislation were extensions of those that were signed into law during the 2001-2022 Florida Legislative Session, [HB7](#) and [SB7044](#), bills that infringed on the ability of students and faculty to engage civilly in intellectual debate without fear of censorship and recrimination According to [Atterbury \(2022\)](#) “in an attempt to reshape the state’s 40 colleges and universities [the current administration] installed GOP allies in top university posts and pushed legislation that could change tenure, limit how university professors can teach lessons on race and even how Florida higher education institutions are accredited” (para. 3).

The League of Women Voters of Florida believes that university students need exposure and opportunity to develop skills as critical thinkers capable of assessing opposing ideas, and to utilize research and personal experience to refine their thinking. This is characteristic of and essential to high quality education.

The League of Women Voters of Florida is also concerned about the fear and intimidation of university scholars stemming from the recent legislation and the consequences for our democracy. [As West notes](#),

If academic experts are discredited and lack legitimacy with the general public, it is hard for them to be effective in civic discussions. And if they worry about prosecution or selective law enforcement, it will limit their ability to challenge government authorities. (2022, para 6)

Across all sections of our report, we discuss the history and importance of the concept of academic freedom, which has been central to the operation of modern universities. Simply stated, academic freedom is open pursuit and dissemination of knowledge, guided by principles and norms of scholarly disciplines, rather than political, religious, economic or other outside influences. Academic freedom relies on peer oversight rather than external surveillance to ensure rigorous and ethical scholarship. It also depends upon collective responsibility for university operations rather than top-down decision making. Our sections show that when academic freedom is not respected, the central mission of universities is threatened. We argue that standards of knowledge creation, independent of outside interference, have led to today’s advances in the sciences, leading to better health and a fuller knowledge of our physical environment, and in the humanities, leading to an appreciation for what makes us human. Neither the standards nor the independence can be cast aside without severe damage.

In the initial section on governance, we document how the traditional power of university faculty, administrators, and trustees has been diminished by legislative and regulatory action, particularly in the past three years. We detail the impact of specific changes on the appointment of university presidents, the tenure system, control of curriculum, accreditation, and finance.

In the section on faculty, we discuss threats to academic freedom posed by recent government action. These include restricting faculty decision making on course content and research topics, regulating specific international enrollment and partnerships, creating an atmosphere of surveillance, and overriding faculty role in governance. We present results of research that document such impacts as a decline in faculty morale, exodus of faculty to other states, difficulties in recruiting new faculty, narrowing of curriculum, decrease in research activity and funding, and reputational damage.

In the area of curriculum, we focus on legislation and regulations that have addressed the content of what is taught in Florida's universities. Specifically, we look at the impact of directives to curtail discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in courses across the curriculum; the designation of general education courses; and the establishment of special institutes outside the traditional academic structure.

The student section contains original research on how the recent legislative and regulatory activity has impacted students. In particular, we address actions that restrict student activity programs and organizations, particularly for underrepresented students, as well as course content on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics. We document how such actions are affecting student learning, sense of belonging, and career choices as well as how students describe an atmosphere of fear and conflict on campus.

In the section on libraries, we discuss how restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion topics have impacted academic libraries and the work of library faculty. These have led to changes on library operations, staffing, collections, and services, impacting access to information by students and faculty. We report on funding cutbacks, loss of academic library staff and expertise, narrowing of acquisitions choices, preemptive removal of materials, and legal issues.

These topical sections, taken together, constitute a report on the current ways in which government action is impacting Florida's universities. They describe an overarching environment of fear and resentment, a loss of morale and trust, flight of faculty to other states, difficulties in recruiting new talent, political interference in governance, narrowed support for student learning and sense of belonging, a decline in research activity and funding, and overall damage to the reputation of Florida's university system.

Our recommendations advocate restoring traditional respect between government and universities through honoring long-held principles of university self-governance and academic freedom. We stress the need for open inquiry, inclusion, and an atmosphere of support for the teaching, research, and service that our universities provide as vital engines for the health and advancement of the state of Florida.

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The Effects of Recent Legislation on Governance in Florida Universities

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Florida legislation, especially since 2022, has had a profound impact on the twelve institutions of the State University System of Florida. In Florida universities, the core process that develops very knowledgeable and skilled professionals in various fields is controlled by a hierarchy of authority:

Florida Governor and Legislature

Board of Governors

Board of Trustees

President

Provosts/VPs

Deans/Associate VPs

Department Chairs

Faculty

Faculty associations in Florida are advisory only. Faculty unions negotiate working conditions.

The control exerted by the top layer, the legislature controlled by a governor and supermajority that have clear agendas, has grown to affect the operations of every subsidiary layer of governance.

Why We Are Concerned

There is concern about university governance because it has increasingly become subject to top-down control, minimizing the governance power of faculty and institutional Boards of Trustees. The governor of Florida appoints most of the Board of Governors of the university system. Its performance funding system pays universities to concentrate on workforce development. In May of 2025 we saw a dramatic example of state-level interference into university governance in the Board of Governors' rejection of a University of Florida presidential nominee selected unanimously by the UF Board of Trustees. Three additional university presidents were chosen from the governor's political allies. Such an approach to university governance is a departure from what has existed in the United States for more than 100 years. The previous approach ensured that faculty expertise and higher education administrative skill were valued and utilized when making such an important decision as to who should be at the helm of the university. It also minimized the role politics would play in such appointments.

Roles of Members of the University Community

The role of members of the university community has changed over time, starting in the 12th century, early European universities were called "university" because they were alliances of students, scholars, and professors. The University of Bologna was controlled

by students, who hired, fired, and determined the pay of faculty. The University of Paris was a corporation under the Notre Dame cathedral school. Both were diffuse organizations not truly subject to a central administrator.

American Beginnings: Development of Shared Governance

Early American universities such as Harvard, established in 1636, were founded by religious organizations specifically for the development of their ecclesiastical leadership. The Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 enabled states to have their own land-grant colleges, which furthered agricultural, engineering, and science studies. The University of Florida, which was once for men only, has both a seminary and an early land-grant college in its [prehistory](#) (UF Faculty Handbook).

In 1915, the American Association of University Professors issued a statement, *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*, stating that academic freedom depends on faculty shared governance. Faculty should be responsible for reviewing their peers as well as determining curriculum and academic standards. Faculty were not to be considered “employees” of the trustees. [Gerber points out](#) that this was a change from 19th century practice, and that in the 21st century shared governance has been eroded by corporate management approaches and the increasing use of contingent faculty (Gerber, 2015).

The Board of Governors in Florida

The Board of Governors of the State University System of Florida (BOG) is in control of much of university governance and in turn is substantially controlled by the Governor who appoints 14 of its 17 members. The other three members of the board include the Commissioner of Education (effectively the governor’s choice), the chair of the Advisory Council of Faculty Senates (or its equivalent), and the president of the Florida Student Association (or its equivalent). [HB1321/SB1726 \(2025\)](#), filed in the Florida legislature, would have set term limits on the members of the BOG and require that they be Florida residents. Despite having been favorably reported from most of its committees, the final hearing on this bill was indefinitely postponed and ultimately withdrawn from consideration.

Florida’s Boards of Trustees

According to the [Florida Constitution](#), each public university’s Board of Trustees has six members appointed by the Governor and six members appointed by the Board of Governors. Since the Governor appoints most of the Board of Governors, he or she can determine the character of all the Boards of Trustees also. He or she can choose to use it not just to place qualified persons in office but to further his specific policy goals. There is no requirement for a Trustee to have any experience in higher education administration or policy development.

The Role of Florida's Faculty Unions and Associations

Faculty groups at Florida's state universities include both faculty unions and faculty associations or senates. Unions are responsible for negotiating terms and conditions of employment such as credit hours per full-time faculty member, office hours, etc. For example, according to a former faculty union president, the union negotiated the specifics of post-tenure review with the Board of Trustees. These negotiations proceed according to contract law. The faculty association at the same institution is concerned with curriculum, research support, and awards, and is not truly independent, since its opinions are advisory only.

In order to negotiate, a faculty union has to be certified. SB256, passed in 2023, applies to all public-employee unions and stipulates that union dues may not be deducted automatically from salaries. It also requires that a union must have 60% of the faculty as members to be certified, ([Florida Statutes \(2023\)](#)). This is a high bar. As of April 12, 2024, according to WLRN Public Media, six of the 12 institutions in the State University System [did not reach 60%](#) participation (Rivero, 2024). Bargaining units that do not meet the threshold have one month to collect "interest card" signatures from at least 30% of members, saying they would like to continue being represented by the union, and a majority (over 50%) of voters must vote to keep their union. This process resulted in the decertification of several unions representing adjunct faculty and non-tenure track positions at some higher education institutions, [including one public university](#), the University of South Florida (Moody, 2024).

The chair of the Advisory Council of Faculty Senates sits on the Board of Governors and has a vote, but only one. The role of this organization, according to the [BOG website](#), is to "serve as a mechanism to discuss issues of importance to higher education in Florida and provide input from a faculty perspective" (State University System of Florida, n.d. a, para.1).

Issues with Recent Presidential Searches

For the past several years, presidents of Florida state universities have been chosen from the ranks of politicians supporting Governor DeSantis rather than academics. Since 2022, the process has accelerated (Moody, 2025a) and [includes:](#)

- Ben Sasse, former senator from Nebraska, at the University of Florida (since resigned), 2022
- Richard Corcoran, former Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, at New College, February 2023
- Adam Hasner, former Florida Republican legislator, at Florida Atlantic, 2025
- Jeannette Nunez, former lieutenant governor of Florida, at Florida International University, 2025

- Manny Diaz, former Florida Commissioner of Education, at the University of West Florida, 2025 (interim, has K-12 education experience)
- Marva Johnson, a lobbyist with ties to the governor, at Florida A&M, 2025

[HB1321](#), which did not make it through the 2025 legislative session, would have changed the regulations for presidential searches in two ways: (1) it would have removed the secrecy surrounding the searches by exempting them from Sunshine Law restrictions, and (2) it would have made each university's Board of Trustees solely responsible for selecting its president and prohibiting the governor from influencing the choice (Higher Education, 2025). Opposed to the bill, Governor DeSantis posted a video on X in which he [proclaimed](#) that, "We have brought accountability to our higher education system, fought the woke, and returned the focus to the classic mission of universities" (DeSantis, 2025, para. 1). It thus appears that current regulations set by the Board of Governors will prevail for the time being. The Board of Trustees of a university is responsible for presidential selection under delegation from the Board of Governors. The Trustees are to assemble a committee that includes one faculty member. The Board of Governors must approve the Trustees choice.

The recent presidential search for the University of Florida offers a compelling example of why there is concern about this process. Dr. Santa J. Ono resigned as University of Michigan President when he was announced as the final candidate in the University of Florida search. Apparently bowing to current political trends, Ono terminated the central diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) office at the University of Michigan, and asked to [have his name removed](#) from a public letter supporting academic freedom (Moody, 2025a). Florida's Board of Governors questioned Ono sharply regarding DEI and his reversal of opinion, which he explained by saying that DEI initiatives began with good intentions but became divisive and consumed resources needed for other things. In an [unprecedented move](#), the Board of Governors cancelled the unanimous decision of the UF Board of Trustees to appoint Ono (Weineck, 2025).

Issues With Faculty Hiring and Tenure

One hundred and ten years after the AAUP statement of 1915, faculty governance of their peers is negligible. [SB266](#) (Higher Education, 2023) required that each university's Board of Trustees be responsible for hiring faculty and may delegate this to the university's president, but the president may not delegate it to anyone else outside their executive management team, such as deans. This potentially removes faculty with expertise in a field from being involved in peer review of a candidate with expertise in that same field who is being considered for hire or tenure. [SB266](#) also included the proviso that diversity, equity and inclusion statements by candidates may not be required in hiring, promotion, tenure, or [evaluation processes](#) (Higher Education, 2023).

The Board of Governors prescribes post-tenure review every five years. One item for review is "whether a faculty member is [in] compliance with state laws, Board of Governors'

regulations, and university [regulations and policies](#)” (State University System, 2023, p.1). Ratings on this review ranging from “exceeds expectations” to “unsatisfactory” are assigned by the Dean and reviewed by chief academic officer. An “unsatisfactory” rating leads to termination and there is no appeal beyond the level of the university president, while a “does not meet expectations” requires a [one-year improvement plan](#) (State University System, 2023, pp. 2-3). A [recent study](#) showed that, since the 2022 implementation of the post-tenure review policy, 5% of tenured faculty have left the state compared with 4% prior to post-tenure review (Quach & Yu, 2025). Researchers refer to this as a “[brain drain](#)” because high producers of research were more likely to leave the state (Alonso, 2025). A faculty leader reported anecdotally that they had noticed this effect firsthand and that initially a few faculty were rated unsatisfactory. Another faculty leader noted that in the last iteration of post-tenure review, half of those reviewed were rated “exceeds expectations” and the other half “meets expectations.”

In 2023, SB266 ([Higher Education, 2023](#)) included the [stipulation](#) that the Board of Governors may call for conducting post-tenure review at any time for cause, but this is not found now in the BOG regulations or the Florida Statutes.

Governance Over Curriculum and Instruction

In the past three years, the Florida legislature has taken an interest in university curricula that goes far beyond the concerns for articulation agreements between in-state post-secondary institutions and a student’s ability to transfer credits to a university. Recent concerns have to do with course content, especially in general education, and what is referred to as viewpoint diversity in instruction. SB266 (Higher Education, 2023) instituted several statutes including [1007.25](#) which states:

General education core courses may not distort significant historical events or include a curriculum that teaches identity politics, violates s. [1000.05](#), or is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities. (Florida Early Learning-20 Education, 2024/2025,3(c))

Curriculum changes are described in detail elsewhere in this report, but here we note that as a result of legislation and resulting statute changes, multiple courses have now been excluded from general education requirements, including sociology. Excluding a course from general education has a very damaging effect on the department that offered it.

The Board of Governors has also required the entire university community to be asked to complete a survey on intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity. Rather than have each university conduct these surveys, they are conducted by a third-party company engaged by the BOG and reported on [the BOG website](#) (Florida Board of Governors, 2024). The response rate on these surveys has been extremely low at first, but system-wide

response rates in 2024 were better at 14.5% for students and 12.3% for employees. The shadow of the Board of Governors appears to loom over nearly every aspect of public university life in Florida.

Accreditation

The Board of Governors currently requires Florida universities to seek accreditation from one of the agencies recognized by the US Department of Education. Board of Governors' regulation 3.006 states that "Discipline-specific accreditation is required for academic programs in which graduation from an accredited program is a prerequisite to achieving licensure or certification for [professional practice](#)" (Florida Board of Governors, (3, 2023b). Other discipline-specific accreditation appears to be optional.

But the accreditation process for Florida's public universities will be changing. The Florida Department of Education explains

During the 2024/2025 legislative session, Senate Bill (SB)7044 created section (s.) [1008.47](#), Florida Statutes (F.S.), to prohibit Florida College System (FCS) institutions and state universities from being accredited by the same accrediting agency or association for consecutive accreditation cycles. It specified that FCS institutions must seek accreditation from a State Board of Education-identified accreditor or association in the year following reaffirmation or fifth-year review by their current [accrediting agencies](#). (Florida Department of Education, n.d., para. 1)

The state's public universities are no longer required or encouraged to seek accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), which had been doing the accreditation for many years. Instead, a plan for a new accrediting organization, Commission for Public Higher Education, was announced on Thursday, June 26, 2025, with [few details](#) (Kelderman, 2025b). It would include the State University System of Florida, Texas A&M University system, the University System of Georgia, the University of North Carolina system, the University of South Carolina, and the University of Tennessee system. Governor DeSantis was quoted as blaming accreditors for "high prices and student debt, degrees that lead to low-paying jobs, and ...an emphasis on progressive ideology and diversity, [equity, and inclusion](#)" (Kelderman, 2025b, para.2).

It should be noted that SACSCOC never had provisions for DEI. Recognition of this new accreditor could take years, although the Trump administration has issued [an executive order that seeks](#) to make it easier for institutions to change accreditors and to expedite federal approval of new accreditors. Streamlining such approval would likely require changes to Education Department regulations, but the administration has yet to announce any new rulemaking on accreditation (Kelderman, 2025a). As of this writing, four

million dollars have been appropriated by the Board of Governors toward development of this new [accrediting organization](#) (Kumar, 2025).

Funding for Florida's Public Universities and Florida DOGE

In contrast to the Florida College System, Florida's public universities receive little to no local funding. State funds are distributed to them as follows: 75.1% state operating funds; 10.7% research, agricultural, and medical; and 14.2% state public financial aid. Total education revenue comes from education appropriations and net tuition revenue. Tuition revenue in 2024 supplied only 12% of total [university funding](#). (State Higher Education Finance, 2024 SHEF Report).

But there are restrictions on how these funds may be spent. HB7 applies to public educational institutions in Florida K-20. Spending restrictions are included in the education conforming bill (SB 2524) for the state budget. [It] "includes a provision that bars a university from receiving performance funding (which totals more than \$500 million annually) if they run afoul of the [mandates of CS/HB 7](#)" (Florida Policy Institute, 2022, p.5). Florida's Board of Governors [Regulation 9.016](#) details prohibitions on university spending state or federal funds on any programs that advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion or that promote or engage in political or social activism (Florida Board of Governors (2023a).

The state legislature also controls finances as well as curriculum by providing for specialized centers in universities. There are many such centers, but only some are created and at least partially funded by the legislature and recent legislation has created and modified several new centers with defined political missions, which seems to contradict the restriction on spending state or federal funds on programs that engage in political activism. One example is the [Center](#) for Classical and Civic Education at the University of Florida (Florida Early Learning-20 Education Code, 2024/2025) now the [Hamilton School](#), which is "devoted to research and teaching on Western civilization and the principles of a free society" by "studying the greatest works of the Western tradition and beyond" (University of Florida Hamilton School, n.d., para. 1).

Yet another example of micromanagement of faculty and staff at Florida's public universities by Governor DeSantis and the Board of Governors occurred on April 2025 when the Governor's office sent a request to universities from the Florida Department of Government Efficiency, asking for grant applications, award notices and agreements; all research published by university staff; all non-instructional employee positions; indirect cost recovery policies for grants; grant descriptions and assigned staff, and [more detail on these](#). Spinnaker, the student newspaper at the University of North Florida, published an exhaustive list of the items submitted and the reasons why specifics on some items were not submitted, including confidentiality agreements for grants and lack of license to faculty publications per agreement with the [faculty union](#). (Schneider, 2025). The consequences of this massive data collection remain unclear.

One of the most impactful ways in which the Board of Governors controls higher education in Florida is the performance funding system, which has been in use since 2014. Most of its metrics identify aspects of universities which could be considered measurements of student success. However, the programs of strategic emphasis are particularly selected to maximize the contribution of the universities to state workforce needs and also to provide graduates good prospects for high paying employment. Metrics connected with these programs report undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Performance Based Funding Metrics: Author's Analysis	
Excellence (HSGPA of freshmen)	Metric 8b
Programs of Strategic Emphasis	Metric 6, Metric 8a
Student Access	Metric 7 (Pell grants), Metric 9b, 9b1
Student postgrad outcomes	Metric 1, Metric 2
Student Progress	Metric 4, Metric 5, Metric 9a, Metric 10
Tuition revenue	Metric 3 (more full pay students)

Degrees awarded are analyzed by a Classification of Instructional Programs system ([CIP codes](#)). There are 55 codes in all. When evaluating a university's performance, extra weight is given to STEM subjects as they are seen as contributing more to the state's workforce needs (State University System of Florida, n.d.b). While there is nothing inherently heinous about the performance funding system, it does undervalue fields that have traditionally found a home in the university, i.e. English, Ethnic/Gender Studies, Legal Studies, Library Studies, Philosophy and Liberal Arts. This conclusion is borne out in minutes of the Board of Governors' January 30, 2025 meeting when it was scheduled to vote on the Board of Governors Strategic Plan for 2030.

The 2030 Strategic Plan of the Board of Governors

The 2030 strategic plan, [SUS 30 Extraordinary Impact](#), was completed during the fall of 2024 and approved January 30, 2025. Its lofty goals sound much like any other strategic plan, but there is a distinct emphasis on the role of the system in furthering the economic goals of Florida and how those goals are to be measured. For example, the stated primary goal for graduates is to "be a top producer of world-class talent. Iconic companies across different sectors will prioritize hiring our graduates" (Florida Board of Governors, 2025, p.17). The Board was tasked with identifying the top brands and companies so that they may promote relationships with those companies. To refine this measurement, they will develop "a new dashboard that compares degrees awarded to workforce demand," (Florida Board of Governors, 2025, p. 17).

At its January 30, 2025 Strategic Planning Meeting, Emily Sikes, Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, confirmed this focus on desired economic outcomes of the state's public universities when she presented an update on the System Strategic Plan for 2030. She noted "the Board devoted much time to the Programs of Strategic Emphasis update in 2023 to develop a list that aligns with the critical [workforce needs](#) of the state" (State University System of Florida, 2025, p. 3). Sikes further expressed the need to "secure employment at iconic companies [and] identify the top brands and companies across different sectors and launch initiatives promoting or enhancing the relationships between these [iconic companies](#) and state universities" (State University System of Florida, 2025, pp. 3-4). Not surprisingly, she reported "that the Board office is working with the universities to leverage faculty data to provide rankings and awards [by discipline](#)" (State University System of Florida, 2025, p. 4).

Like the 2030 strategic plan, titled *SUS30: Extraordinary Impact*, the previous 2025 [System Strategic Plan](#) (Board of Governors, 2019) aimed to respond to workforce demands and included performance funding criteria with Programs of Strategic Emphasis. But it also contained several references to public service and societal needs. For example, a priority stated in the Mission Statement was to "Deliver knowledge to advance the health, welfare, cultural enrichment, and economy through community and business engagement and service," (Board of Governors, 2019, p. 9). Clearly there is a change of emphasis from the 2025 to the 2030 plan. An examination of the strategic plan [for 2030](#) reveals that engagement with the community beyond business interests has disappeared along with any purpose for cultural enrichment and welfare.

Conclusion

State control of Florida higher education at the public university level is very prescriptive. When the hiring of faculty and administrators, the curriculum to be offered to students, and the structure of the university itself are dictated from a state level, there is no place for the considered judgment of people close to each university's historical character and its mission. Neither is the university free to consider national and international trends and ideas in knowledge creation in the design of its educational offerings. Balancing these two influences is the essence of distinctiveness for a university.

Faculty and administrators are selected and retained depending on their adherence to state goals which are influenced by political trends, and if faculty do not adhere to them, their contributions to the sum of human knowledge can be cast aside. They cannot think for themselves as we have come to expect scholars to do. Even though corporate management styles have infiltrated universities in the 21st century, the effect of this until recently was mainly felt in the area of finance. Recent legislation has made it clear that Florida's state government also intends to control the academic and scholarly options of universities.

The American university has attained a preeminent place in the expansion of human knowledge, not only in the sciences but also in the humanities. Florida universities are no exception. If this is replaced by the promotion of a state approved worldview, we will all be impoverished.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made that would address recent, disruptive changes to governance policies at Florida's public universities and would ensure a high quality academic environment where the expertise of faculty and administrators is advantaged in decision making regarding all aspects of university policies.

- A shared governance model at each of Florida's public universities should replace what has become so centralized that authority is concentrated in a small group, primarily of individuals who work outside the university.
- The current emphasis on economic outcomes for students attending Florida's public university system is too limited; other student needs, institutional needs, and faculty skills should also be considered when making strategic decisions.
- To attract the broadest population of students who will be successful in all types of careers and workplaces, Florida's public university policies should support a wide curriculum, rather than one that prioritizes economic outcomes.
- Those governing Florida's public universities should watch that its emphasis on economic outcomes doesn't ultimately duplicate the career/technology focus of the Florida College System or the state's community colleges.
- Hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions at Florida's public universities should be made by those with relevant subject matter expertise.
- Faculty at Florida's public universities should not be restricted in their research or grant applications but should be related to their interests and areas of expertise.
- The Board of Trustees for each of Florida's public universities should conduct its own presidential searches.
- Searches for presidents for Florida's public universities should be held in the sunshine with full transparency.

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Impact of Recent Florida Legislation on Faculty

Marianne Barnes and Nancy Van Note Chism

Overview: Faculty

Faculty members are subject matter experts who have studied for many years and demonstrated their learning through exams, dissertations, and performance. As experts, they rely on having freedom to research, learn, collaborate, and teach in accordance with the standards of their professions. Their peers hold them accountable for their work quality through continual review of practice and publication.

When governmental actors prescribe the ways in which faculty members should conduct their work, especially when a political agenda is involved, faculty work is compromised. The result is that faculty members become demoralized and fearful. They begin to censor their actions, lose commitment, and experience high stress levels.

Recent legislative and administrative directives in Florida aim to control faculty actions and work life, chiefly by focusing on what national and state decision makers term “woke” ideology, which is not precisely defined. They have created an environment of distrust and low morale among faculty. Faculty members fear that their administrators are not protecting them and that faculty members are no longer valued partners in institutional governance. The principle of academic freedom in teaching, research, and service is being violated. State efforts to examine faculty activities for compliance have created an atmosphere of surveillance and fear.

Impacts for Florida institutions, documented below in statistics from survey research, include an exodus of faculty members to other states or professions, difficulties in recruiting new faculty, loss of research opportunities and funding, overload on remaining faculty, and loss of prestige for Florida colleges and universities. Opportunities for students to engage in a free exchange of knowledge in the classroom are limited. Academic research and service contributions to society are curtailed. In short, the traditional norm of understanding and respect between university and state has been breached.

Background: The Concept of Faculty

The concept of faculty has undergone a gradual evolution from teachers in medieval universities to professionals who practice teaching, research, and service in modern universities. Likewise, the definition of faculty has changed in response to shifts from agrarian, to industrial, and to technological environments over the years. The original focus on the liberal arts shifted to inclusion of science, technology, and professional education (Moore, 2018; Thelin, 2019). Faculty have come to be seen as subject matter specialists who have studied in depth to achieve expertise in a given body of knowledge. Autonomy in

the pursuit of knowledge, overseen by a body of peers who evaluate their work, is therefore essential. Faculty are expected to continuously engage in scholarly work. They also are expected to share their insights with the profession, students, and society at large. They do this through a tripartite role in teaching, research, and service. In the past century, postsecondary institutions became larger and more highly structured by academic discipline. Faculty members have thus been expected to assume shared governance of the institution.

After several meetings, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and the Association of American Colleges (AAC) issued the [1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#). The primary focus is on the common good. The organizations argued that in order to do research and to teach without pressure from outside forces seeking to promote a certain point of view, faculty needed academic freedom: “*Academic freedom in its teaching aspect is fundamental for the protection of the rights of the teacher in teaching and of the student to freedom in learning. It carries with it duties correlative with rights.*” (American Association of University Professors & Association of American Colleges, 1940, p.14). The two organizations supported tenure as a way to protect this freedom to explore and share knowledge.

In public institutions, especially, the conception of faculty as professionals whose work demands academic freedom exists in tension with legislative and regulatory bodies who believe they should oversee specific aspects of faculty work in state colleges and universities (Gretzinger, 2023). The tension has become particularly sharp in Florida. As former state senator Randy Fine [commented](#), “I am sick and tired of faculty members at these schools who think that they are better than what they are—they are state employees” (Quinn, 2024). Commenting on the exodus of faculty from the Florida system, Governor DeSantis, “Just understand: If you have Marxist professors leaving, that is a gain for the state of Florida,” he said. “That’s not a negative.” (Kumar, 2023). These publicly stated opinions devalue the expertise of faculty members as professionals whose specialized knowledge is essential to plan and deliver curricula. They also imply that faculty employed in state universities have no special professional status and are subject to additional oversight.

In the mid 1900’s, the Supreme Court was staunch in its defense of academic freedom. However, government entities are increasingly calling upon the courts to limit academic freedom in public colleges and universities in recent years. The courts are now frequent sites of skirmishes on issues of viewpoint discrimination and freedom of speech between faculty members and lawmakers.

The growing gap between the relative autonomy of colleges and universities and public government intervention impacts faculty in many ways. Faculty decision making on what content to teach, what topics to research, and what public service to pursue is being challenged to a greater extent than ever before. Recent legislation and regulations are impinging upon the role of faculty to oversee the quality of the work of their peers and to

participate in institutional leadership. This paper discusses the current national context and significant legislation in Florida and its impact on faculty work, leading to analysis of reports and studies that document faculty response to current conditions in Florida.

The National Context for Faculty Work

At both the federal and state level, colleges and universities are the subject of an increasing number of government actions (Aragoni, 2025). Prior to 2025, most of this action was taking place in several states. A particular theme across these actions is interest in restricting the presence of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, often with no clear definitions of these terms. These efforts are evidenced in such actions as restricting the considerations of diversity in faculty hiring, requiring faculty to remove DEI language or topics from the curriculum, ridding campuses of DEI offices and language, and cancelling grants on DEI topics. Failure to comply with these dictates often leads to threats of withholding resources and eliminating programs.

Survey research conducted by the AAUP, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U, formerly AAC), and Ithaka-S+R in 2023 and 2024 focused particularly on the topic of academic freedom in states where legislative activities have been most pronounced (American Association of University Professors Georgia, 2024; Finley & Tiede, 2025; Hulbert & Pornowski, 2024). The overall results of these surveys document impacts on faculty job satisfaction, retention, recruitment, and work.

The studies find that faculty members feel that their decision making about what to teach and research has been curtailed. Many report not being free to express their viewpoints in public presentations or on social media. They feel that they work in an atmosphere of surveillance where their actions are continually scrutinized. Faculty members report that they do not feel supported by their administrators and cannot speak openly in department meetings. They report pervasive low morale personally and across their colleagues.

The studies report that a significant number of faculty members are leaving ~~Florida~~ institutions to work elsewhere. They document that recruitment of replacement faculty is difficult since many potential applicants are avoiding seeking positions in states with restrictions on faculty work and remaining faculty are on overload as they take on the work of those who have left. The studies conclude that the reputation of these colleges and universities is being damaged. (See Appendix A for actual data.)

Significant Recent Legislation in Florida

Several laws enacted during the past five years impact faculty work in Florida's universities. A harbinger of what was to come was the Campus Free Expression Act, passed in 2021. The resulting statute introduced the Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity Survey that asks faculty to record their opinions annually about such things as political beliefs in the

classroom and comfort levels in sharing these views. The legislation also permits students to record classroom lectures for personal use or as evidence in complaints against faculty. Although completion of the survey is optional and the law was met with opposition by United Faculty of Florida and several lawsuits, it created an atmosphere of state surveillance. Faculty were no longer assured that their viewpoints were protected from outside interference. Anxiety and protective reactions were natural responses.

In 2022, [CS/HB7](#), the bill that became known as the Stop WOKE Act was passed; the law prohibits teaching that any race, national origin, color, or sex is morally superior or implying that any person or institution is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive (Individual Freedom, 2022). [The application of this law to higher education remains in litigation as of this writing.](#) This Act intrudes significantly on curricular decisions and scholarly research of faculty; it is far-ranging and represents a watershed moment in governmental impact. Despite the current court injunction, the kind of self-censorship and anxiety engendered by the 2022 legislation deepened.

Also in 2022, [SB7044](#) required tenure-granting universities to implement systems of post-tenure review (Postsecondary Education, 2022). As articulated in Board of Governors regulations [10.003](#), tenured faculty members must undergo post-tenure review every five years, according to criteria and processes outlined in the statute. This requirement adds a layer to an already rigorous system of faculty evaluation, which requires faculty to submit dossiers of their work; peer judgment, within and outside the university; student evaluations of teaching; and letters of recommendation at key points in their careers as well as portfolios of these types of evidence for annual reviews. The enumeration of criteria by those outside the profession, along with the establishment of a process outside the shared governance model, has resulted in administratively-developed systems that fail to capture the complexities of faculty work. (See faculty comments on the tenure system in Appendix B).

2023 brought on two main pieces of legislation that directly impact faculty work in Florida's universities. The first, the Higher Education law ([SB266](#)—applied to the State University System) emphasizes the oversight of the state-level Board of Governors to review all programs in order to identify any curriculum that is based on theories such as Critical Race Theory that posit that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities.

The bill also addresses the nature of the courses that would fulfill requirements for the general education core, emphasizing the same content restrictions. This law and subsequent implementation by the governing bodies represent a key restriction on faculty academic freedom. Removing courses from the general education core causes drops in enrollment for their academic homes, creating a domino effect leading to lower funding available for graduate student assistantships and research activity. These actions can also decrease the scope of what undergraduates are exposed to in their studies.

The law also restricts faculty decision making in hiring, and curtails use of public funds for student activities connected with diversity, equity, and inclusion—issues that are treated in other sections of this report. Taken together, this law and its implementation increased faculty anxiety about state control of academic decision making and heightened concern about their vulnerability.

A second law passed in 2023 that directly impacts faculty work is CS/CS/SB 846: Agreements of Educational Entities with Foreign Entities. Although still under litigation, this law prohibits participation of faculty in state universities in partnerships with faculty and students from China, Venezuela, Cuba, Syria, Iran, and North Korea, unless permitted by the State University System Board of Governors. Such restrictions curtail faculty research projects and recruitment of international faculty and students from countries that have been particularly involved in STEM field activities.

Regulatory Changes

The governing body of Florida’s university system has heightened the impact of laws passed by the legislature. The State University System Board of Governors has radically trimmed the number and kind of courses that are offered as [general core courses](#), issued instructions about publicly posting course materials, and instituted [key word searches](#) of these materials to check for violations (Jean, 2024; Moray, 2024). Such actions override the principle of faculty peer oversight and further heighten-faculty sense that professional judgment and control are being usurped by government overreach.

In summary, recent legislation has impacted faculty work on a number of fronts, leading to problems of faculty flight to other states, difficulties in recruiting new faculty members, and a severe crisis of morale among many faculty who continue to work in the state’s postsecondary system. The impact on the unbiased quality education of students is the ultimate consequence.

Documented Impact of Legislative and Regulatory Body Intervention on Faculty

2024 AAUP Study—Faculty in the South

The most relevant survey data on the impact of legislation in Florida on faculty work was obtained from the Florida public college and university [subsample](#) (Chism, 2024) of the 2024 AAUP study, *Faculty in the South Survey* (American Association of University Professors Georgia, 2024). The results show dramatically higher impact in Florida than across southern states as a whole:

- 39% of Florida faculty had already applied for a job in higher education in another state; 44% said they plan to do so in the next cycle
- Faculty listed main reasons for applying for jobs in another state:

- Threats to academic freedom 92%
- State's broad political climate 78%
- Salary 57%
- DEI issues 51%
- Tenure issues 44%
- Damage to shared governance 40%
- 63% indicated that these factors curtailed their desire to remain in academia
- 93% rated the current political atmosphere for higher ed in Florida as very bad

Qualitative Findings. While the quantitative findings highlight overall faculty responses, the comments offered by Florida faculty add important insights. Faculty were asked to provide examples of how changes to tenure, contracts and/or academic freedom, are directly impacting their work. Approximately two-thirds of the sample of 339 (222 faculty) chose to submit a comment; most were several sentences long and some several paragraphs long. Only four of these comments indicate that there has been a positive or no impact. Their answers fall into the categories of Environment, Academic Freedom, Faculty Work and Recruitment, LGBTQ+/DEI Restrictions, Shared Governance, and Research Restrictions. (See Appendix 2 for sample comments.)

On the topic of environment, many faculty reported feeling devalued and not supported by their administration. They said that they work within an atmosphere of fear that affects their morale. In comments concerning excessive scrutiny and surveillance and perceived threats to their academic freedom, faculty expressed the reasons for the atmosphere of fear. Several mentioned a recent incident during which a state representative prompted state-level officials to do a keyword search of course descriptions so that materials on that topic (the Israel and Palestine conflict) could be examined for bias.

Another very strong theme among the respondent comments was how the atmosphere of fear and restrictions on academic freedom have affected faculty retention and recruitment. In particular, the respondents addressed the impact of the initiation of post-tenure review as a factor related to loss of existing faculty and lowered ability to recruit new faculty. Faculty perceived that the way in which the reviews are organized and implemented in a top-down and uneven fashion destroys the notion of tenure in Florida. They argue, as does AAUP, that tenure is a tradition of rigorous peer and administrative oversight. As part of established processes, faculty already receive annual reviews, rendering post-tenure redundant. Faculty turnover has created additional strain for those who remain.

Several faculty used their comments to lament the effect on student learning caused by restrictions on teaching. They report being unable to use such effective learning strategies as open inquiry, discussion, and debate in their classes.

Faculty comments also frequently addressed restrictions on teaching or researching DEI topics or devoting university funds to support diverse students through centers or events relating to DEI. Faculty also commented on the impact of government actions on their research. They portrayed this impact as interrelated with post-tenure review and DEI.

Faculty responses on the current situation of higher education in Florida also focused on threats to the traditional notion of faculty governance, whereby faculty, as a profession, are expected to be involved in major decisions affecting their institutions, such as hiring, advancement, curricula, sanctions, and quality of work. In their comments, they described an erosion of their influence in governance and a shift to administrative and legislative control, including appointed boards of trustees. One particular example cited in several comments described outside influence in the choice of a university president, to the exclusion of faculty involvement, as a threat to shared governance.

USC Study on Post Tenure Review Legislation

An additional recent study, performed at the University of Southern California, looked specifically at the impact of Florida's new system of state-mandated post tenure review implemented in 2023 (Quach & Yu, 2025). The study used publication records in national data bases, curricula vitae, citations, and other information to study faculty responses to this implementation. They looked at four potential impacts: effect on research productivity, faculty retention, separation decisions by productivity levels, and selection of new hires. Specifically, the study concluded:

- Implementing state-mandated post tenure review did not increase research productivity of either highly-productive or low-productivity faculty.
- In the years immediately preceding implementation of state-mandated post tenure review, faculty were leaving Florida institutions in significantly higher numbers than faculty in previous years. Largely, these professors moved out of state or left academia entirely, rather than moving to other universities within Florida.
- Those faculty who left were more likely to be highly-cited scholars with an above-median number of publications. Their departures even before the implementation of state-mandated post tenure review indicate the voluntary nature of their separation. In contrast, low-productivity faculty departed after the implementation, suggesting possible intent to avoid review.
- After 2022, when state-mandated post tenure was implemented, a marked decrease in the number of prior publications among new hires occurred, a 13-18% decrease in incoming record of productivity when compared with previous cohorts.

The researchers concluded, "Taken together, the estimates indicate that eliminating tenure caused a brain drain effect that exceeded the direct effect of firing unproductive

workers, leading to net positive selection in the productivity of leavers. (Quach & Yu, 2024, p. 9).

Summary of Damaging Impacts

In summary, the main impacts of recent Florida legislation on faculty include:

- The advent of a climate of fear that affects overall institutional operations and performance
- Significant weakening of faculty morale that influences their work in teaching, research, and service
- Faculty flight, resulting in loss of major talent, including high-productivity teachers and scholars and underrepresented faculty who were expressly recruited for their contributions
- Reputational damage that harms faculty recruitment, causing stress on remaining faculty to cover empty academic and student support positions
- Restrictions on graduate student recruitment, influencing research projects and preparation of future faculty and researchers
- Erosion of trust between faculty and students, faculty and administrators
- Harm to student learning processes caused by suppressed content and course design
- Restrictions on research, affecting funding and prestige levels, as well as Florida's contribution to the advancement of science, health, technology, culture, and the social good of the state and world beyond
- An added layer of faculty evaluation through mandated post-tenure review that creates a cumbersome addition to an already-rigorous system and may lead to inappropriate decisions.

Why We Should Be Concerned

Given the major impacts documented in this paper, it is clear that faculty work is notably impacted by recent legislation. Working in an atmosphere of fear within which trust between administrators and faculty is damaged leads to repeated instances of conflict in the workplace. Loss of participation in governance renders faculty unequal partners and undercuts professional stature. Perceptions of lack of both support and pursuit of common goals engender self-censorship and repressed and overt hostility. The result is lack of commitment leading to low productivity in Florida's public universities.

The damage to the reputation of Florida as a state where universities can flourish has led surveyed faculty to report on the inability of our institutions to attract top talent across administrators, faculty, and student lines. Delays in searches subject to additional regulations and approval are causing failed searches and adjunct faculty are filling empty positions. Empty positions and overwork of remaining faculty are affecting the quality of teaching, research, and service.

Restrictions on international collaborations and the topics of research reduce the amount and kind of the research activity that generates substantial income for Florida postsecondary institutions and supplements the cost of much graduate and professional education. The quality of the future workforce in Florida is in danger. Indeed, advances in all areas of research that expand knowledge bases in the disciplines, seek solutions to local, state, and worldwide problems, and promote the common good are in jeopardy.

Interference in faculty oversight for teaching and learning directly affects the learning of students in Florida's colleges and universities. Classrooms where essential course content has been repressed or simply removed from the curriculum hinder students from entering additional educational settings and workplaces where knowledge of this content is expected. Suppression of open inquiry and critical analysis leads to a citizenry unable to participate intelligently in our democracy.

The relationships between students and faculty are apparent in classrooms. If open inquiry occurs, then students feel free to ask questions and to expect responses from faculty in environments characterized by trust and freedom from fear. Faculty exude enthusiasm for teaching and students experience the rewards of learning. When these conditions are impacted by low morale and fear of possible government action, the natural teacher-student rapport is affected. Effective teaching and learning are at the core of higher education and must not be suppressed.

Recommendations

Faculty commitment and productivity are central to the success of any institution. If our universities are to thrive, government oversight must respect the professionalism of faculty and resist imposing restrictions that impair their work. For Florida's public universities to flourish, it is important that:

- Faculty members are respected for subject matter expertise that sets them apart as the key decision makers in the areas of curriculum and research
- Academic freedom is protected from interference by political, religious, or civil forces outside the academy
- Oversight for faculty decision making is entrusted in the system of peer review in which professional codes of conduct are upheld
- Faculty advancement is judged by established disciplinary and collegial reward systems
- The faculty role in shared governance continues to be an important component of university administration

New ways of involving and protecting faculty will require creativity and experimentation within institutional settings as they engage in strategic planning (McClure, 2024). As a country, we must be especially vigilant to protect academic freedom in our universities. "What we are witnessing is not just an attack on academia or a set of fiscal

reforms or a painful political rebalancing. It is an attack on the conditions that allow free thought to exist. We may not yet know its full cost, but we will feel its consequences for decades.” (O’Rourke, 2025).

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Appendix A

Summary of Data from National Studies of Faculty and Academic Freedom (National Faculty Samples)

American Association of Colleges and Universities Survey Data

A [survey on academic freedom](#) conducted by the AAC&U between late 2023 and early 2024 was based on a national sample of faculty. Respondents from states where legislative restrictions on academic freedom had been passed reported that they had been restricted in

- Speaking freely on social media (36%)
- Speaking freely at department meetings (34%)
- Freely deciding the content of their courses (29%)
- Speaking freely in public presentations (20%)
- Choosing topics for research (15%)

Sixteen percent of these faculty members indicated that they were considering seeking employment elsewhere, given the climate for academic freedom in their states.

The study also documents the extent to which faculty felt apprehensive or self-censored their actions. Across all states, whether legislation affecting academic freedom had been passed or not, faculty reported changes in their behaviors:

- 52.8% felt concerned about their ability to express what they believe as a scholar
- 45.3% refrained from openly expressing opinions in public or participating in activities from fear that doing so could affect their position as a faculty member
- 52.1% altered their written language to avoid controversy
- 28% felt concern about being the target of online harassment
- 51.1% had conversations with colleagues about job security connected with academic freedom

In short, the study ~~documented~~ reveals an atmosphere of anxiety about academic freedom and behavioral changes across faculty in light of actual or anticipated legislation in their states.

American Association of University Professors

In a 2024 [study](#) by the AAUP, conducted in 12 southern states, researchers found:

- 58.7% would not recommend their state as a desirable place to work for colleagues

- 28 % are planning to apply in another state in the coming year
- 27.7 % have applied for academic jobs in other states since 2022
- 27.7 % said they do not plan to stay in academia long term.

Faculty listed the following main reasons for their decision to leave: salary (56.5 %), the state's broad political climate (53.3 %); attacks on academic freedom (49.6 %); issues related to tenure (30%); restrictions on diversity, equity, and inclusion content (30%); and on changes in shared governance (30%).

The survey documents the impact of political attacks and policy changes on hiring within higher education. Respondents noted: a decrease in the number of applicants (49.8%); a decline in the quality of applicants (44.1%), and increases in offer refusals (41.8%).

Seventy percent of respondents rated the political atmosphere surrounding higher education as poor or very poor and about 55 percent did not feel that their administration adequately defended academic freedom and tenure.

Ithaka-S+R

Ithaka-S+R conducts a national study of faculty every three years. In the 2024 survey, the organization included a subset of questions on academic freedom. On the whole, the study concluded that about two-thirds of instructors report facing challenges to academic freedom, but most of them do not report feeling unsafe or uncomfortable teaching most sensitive topics (except for abortion, contraception, and the Middle East). Since survey respondents were from both public and private colleges, there were some differences, with faculty in private schools feeling more insulated from interference. The report of the survey did not disaggregate the data by the presence or absence of restrictive state policies except for one set of questions. For these items:

- 23% of instructors in states with restrictive policies reported that they cannot teach DEI topics (7% in states without restrictions)
- 22% felt influenced against teaching DEI by employment or professional success concerns (14% in states without restrictions)
- Instructors in restrictive and nonrestrictive states both felt comfortable talking with students and colleagues about sensitive issues (53% versus 50%)

Given the diversity of the sample and types of state environments, it is hard to draw conclusions from this survey about the impact of state legislation, yet it offers a picture of the overall context for academic freedom in the country.

Appendix B

Examples of Faculty Comments on the AAUP Study of Faculty in the South, Florida Subsample

Comments Reporting No Government Impact on Faculty Work (4 total)

No effect on me.

None that I'm aware of.

None. I am at U of South Florida and our leadership has not quietly resisted attempts to politicize our university.

Not myself, but I know some of my colleagues are self-censoring some of their lgbtq+ related content.

Comments on Impact (selected from 222 total and organized by theme)

Environment

We are all terrified.

Morale is incredibly low as colleagues are in fear of firing. The university administration treats faculty with near-contempt during contract negotiations, reflecting the governor's and legislature's view of us.

I feel on-edge all the time waiting for the shoe to drop and it has taken a lot of the joy out of my passion for research and teaching.

It has added a significant layer of complication to doing my job effectively by forcing me to consider how my actions could be perceived by one rogue administrator or (increasingly) mid-level politician rather than a reasonable panel of professionals.

I think that the expression "living in a dictatorship" is a good description of the impact.

It is primarily a psychological torture. . . .So it is more about living in fear than it is about directly silenced.

Fighting the political intrusion into higher education in the state has made faculty existence miserable. We are so compromised that EVERY faculty member I know in the humanities or arts wants to quit or leave (and some in the cherished STEM fields, too.)

Academic Freedom

Changes to academic freedom have severely restricted what can be taught or even discussed in the classroom in my department. It has caused words like “race” and “racism” to be barred from syllabi. It has made us all scared to speak about controversial issues—issues of gender, issues of race, issues of religion, issues of a partisan nature, and more—due to fear of retribution.

Government officials are forcing us to change what courses we teach, our course titles, and what books we assign. They are regularly searching our email, our syllabi, our course readings for “banned” words.

I’m not supposed to mention climate change in my Environment Science and Conservation courses. The state is making the argument that since I’m a state employee, they have control over what I say.

I cannot be honest in what I tell my students without fear of reprisals from the state.

Florida has become toxic to anyone who believes in freedom of inquiry, freedom of speech, and the need to expose students to critical inquiry and a diversity of viewpoints. . . . We are being censored from telling legitimate truths.

Impact on the Established Faculty Tenure System

The institution implemented Post-Tenure Review with minimal input from faculty members. There was not shared governance or discussion. The provost can make a unilateral decision that is contrary to the recommendations of everyone else without cause or the ability to grieve and there is no arbitration. . . . As a result tenure is as good as a 5-year contract.

The post-tenure review law has put all faculty on rolling five-year contracts, with a real possibility of losing one’s job every five years entirely at the discretion of non-expert upper administrators (faculty in one’s field have no input into the process.)

Impact on Faculty Recruitment

Faculty candidate applications are down by 50% or more in our searches vs. five years ago and we can’t get candidates to accept our offers; one recent search took us six offers over two years before someone said yes. Morale is abysmal among Florida faculty and many are leaving or looking for opportunities.

Three searches have failed, due to lack of applicants and/or candidates turning down offers. Candidates have specifically cited anti-LGBTQ and anti-diversity legislation.

In 2023 we tried to search but received 29 applications and of those only 14 could get their references completed. Half of the applicants had their references refuse to write letters for them to go to Florida.

We have struggled to fill faculty lines and continue to lose faculty at an alarming rate. This increases the workload and the potential for burnout on the remaining faculty and staff.

I have to teach things I wouldn't normally teach because we don't have good faculty coming in who can teach those things. It severely hamstrings what our department can offer students.

Impact on Students

[A major impact has been] my ability to facilitate learning in an authentic way!

[The Board of Governors'] desire is for a college degree to simply be vocational education to prepare students to be "cogs in a machine" rather than employees who understand social, political, and economic factors.

This is limiting the ability of faculty to freely teach and the ability of students to freely learn. The chilling effect and general fear filters through us to our students.

There is a greater sense of unease about presenting and allowing our students to express divergent points of view. . . . The political atmosphere in this state has affected our students' participation in class discussion on important issues and interest in greater participation in a democracy.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

I have opted not to reteach a seminar on social justice issues because of the government/governor's hostility to all things "DEI" or "woke."

DEI is gone so no more of the good work I could do there. It is hard to be the advisor for an inclusivity club in this environment. The books I wish to teach for some courses are not acceptable to the community because they speak to DEI.

The DEI and "Don't Say Gay" legislation as well as other types of restrictions have had a chilling effect on discussions about literature, history, sociology, and in communication.

Impact on Research

Faculty have had to stop using the words “diversity, equity, and inclusion” in research and grant-related projects in order to receive support.

Research articles have been suppressed by the Office of the General Counsel.

All our faculty with large grants have now moved on to other states.

I was invited to apply for a grant (~\$200,000) to study racial bias in decision making. But given the nature of the research, my grants office told me there was a non-zero chance that they would reject the money.

We cannot recruit students from countries of concern, but many talented students, including faculty, come from these countries. That severely limits research advancement.

Impact on Governance

I have never seen a profession over which non-guild members seek such control. Let academics determine which lawyers should make partner in our overlord’s firms and see how they like it.

We came within one vote of having an unqualified front of the governor installed as our president, an event which has already occurred at other public universities in the state.

I served on three search committees last year. In all three searches, the committee made a recommendation to hire a candidate. This recommendation was approved by the appropriate academic division via vote, then approved by the provost’s office, and ultimately rejected by the president. The president then decided to hire candidates that he—or a college trustee—inserted into the search process.

Administration does not follow procedures outlined in the Collective Bargaining Agreement: shared governance is disappearing. Insertion of candidates into searches has been problematic for search committees.

Government Interference in the Control of Curricula in State Universities

Scott Baldwin

[Florida Senate Bill 266](#) (Higher Education, 2023) authorizes the state of Florida to reverse state university faculty curriculum decisions whenever those decisions fail to meet the educational or political objectives of the state. The following essay briefly describes the evolution of university curriculum in the United States and the threats to university curricula from the state of Florida, with special attention to Senate Bill 266.

Brief History of University Curriculum in the United States

In 1636 Harvard University was founded in Cambridge by the Massachusetts Bay Colony and was the first institution of higher education in what is now the United States. The original purpose of the school was to train new ministers for the colony. The curriculum for Harvard in 1636 was authorized by the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court, influenced by Puritan religious leaders, and modeled on English university curricula, especially that of Cambridge University. Harvard's primary aim was to train a learned clergy and uphold Puritan religious and moral values (Morison, 1936).

Harvard's educational plan was to prepare men in classical languages, logic and rhetoric, theology and scripture, Latin and Greek, and ethics and philosophy. The university was managed by the Puritan church, but the ministers who served as instructors had no control over the curriculum. Other institutions such as Yale, Princeton, and Brown, followed the Harvard model.

The University of Virginia (UVA) was founded in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson who envisioned it as a radically new kind of university—one that emphasized secular education, student self-governance, and a modern curriculum free from religious control. UVA's founding marked a key moment in the development of American higher education, particularly in terms of faculty empowerment and academic departmentalization (Wills, 2015).

Jefferson believed that faculty—not clergy, politicians, or trustees—should control the curriculum. UVA pioneered allowing faculty to organize into academic departments, design curricula, and govern academic matters. UVA was the first U.S. university to give faculty significant authority over academic matters and to adopt a department-based structure, which anticipated the modern American university model.

Jefferson's influence was profound in shaping the university as a secular and rational institution aimed at preparing citizens for a democratic society. As knowledge became more developed during the nineteenth century, the specialization by discipline as a part of university organization that arose in Germany and other parts of Europe was

adopted as well in the United States, leading to a department-based structure across all universities (Thelin, 2019).

Faculty senates and curriculum committees in U.S. universities began to emerge in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as part of shifts in university governance and the professionalization of the faculty. Faculty committees evaluated and either approved or disapproved new courses, new programs, and modifications in degree programs, with recommendations typically referred to the Provost or President (Rudolf, 1977). Today, however, faculty power to make curriculum decisions within universities, particularly in Florida, is being eroded as government officials exercise increased control over the faculty and curriculum. The ultimate question now is: *How has government intrusion into the business of teaching and learning impacted our universities?*

Traditional Curriculum Design and Approval Processes

College curricula are always in a state of flux based on demands from accrediting agencies, professional organizations, and the expanding knowledge base in every academic field. While the process varies across institutions, new programs and courses require approvals from the relevant academic department, the academic dean, the University Curriculum Committee, and then the provost.

At each step in the curriculum approval process there are questions to be answered before a new course or program can be added to the curriculum. For example: Why do our students need this new course or program? What special benefit does it offer to the institution? Will the course or program require new faculty, special equipment, additional library resources, or space? Will the proposed course be redundant with courses or programs already offered by other departments? What is the projected enrollment? If the department faculty and chair approve the proposal, it moves forward to the dean of the pertinent school or college, then to the University Curriculum Committee, and finally to the provost. For more than one hundred years, U.S. college and university faculty have redesigned curricula in every discipline to enhance the intellectual development of the student body and to keep their institutions competitive with the rest of the world.

Florida's Efforts to Control the Curriculum

During the past five years, the government of Florida has passed several pieces of legislation on university curricula that have developed into statutes and then into regulations and oversight by the Florida Board of Governors. These have affected the subject matter content of courses, the composition of the general education core, and the majors available to students. They have also led to establishment of academic centers outside of and competing with existing campus departments.

Course Subject Matter

[Florida House Bill 7](#), commonly known as the Stop Woke Act, was signed into law in May 2022. It prohibits schools from teaching concepts about discrimination by race, gender, or national origin, what the government has called “divisive concepts” (Individual Freedom, 2022). Although the higher education application of this law remains under a court injunction, the Board of Governors and Department of Education have nonetheless called for increased scrutiny of courses with material on these topics.

One theory, critical race theory (CRT), became a primary source of complaint. CRT is an academic framework developed in the 1970s and 1980s by legal scholars—such as Kimberle Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado—to examine how race and racism are embedded in U.S. laws and institutions. They found extensive evidence (Crenshaw et al., 1995). For example, during the great depression of the 1930s, the federal government created a program for government-backed mortgages. Unfortunately, the underwriting manual advised against insuring mortgages in Black neighborhoods, deeming them “high risk” and refusing loans to black families even when the families were evaluated as creditworthy. The maps used by mortgage companies had black neighborhoods outlined in red, hence the origin of the term *redlining*, which condemned huge numbers of Black families to generational poverty—even if they were credit worthy. It is worth noting that *redlining* was legal and federally endorsed until the *Fair Housing Act* of 1968 (Taylor, 2019). Although CRT documents instances like these, many political actors, including those in Florida, deny the validity of CRT out of hand because of personal disagreement or its embarrassing social implications.

In 2023 the preoccupation with Critical Race Theory led to a more extensive interest in diversity, equity, and inclusion instruction and practices in Florida’s K-20 public schools, including its public colleges and universities, resulting in additional restrictions against dealing with topics of sex, race, color, or national origin as detailed in [Florida Senate Bill 266](#). The law bans the use of public funds for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs in all Florida universities and places restrictions on curricula that promote “identity politics” or what the law calls “theories that systemic racism or sexism are inherent in U.S. institutions” (Higher Education, 2023). Other directives were issued to ensure that courses avoid treating concepts such as climate control, Israel, or other politically-charged ideas or are expected to present an interpretation that is generally rejected by scholars, such as the limited role of human beings in [climate change](#) (National Academies, 2020).

As these restrictions on curriculum content were being developed, [concurrent legislation](#) (SB7044) was passed in 2022 requiring faculty to post course descriptions, the course syllabi, and reading lists on the universities’ websites (Postsecondary Education, 2022). In addition to issuing regulations on implementing legislative directives, the Board of Governors and State Department of Education have also instituted several methods to ensure compliance, such as mandating [key word searches](#) of course materials, syllabi,

and descriptions in order to determine whether regulations are being followed (Moray, 2024). Thus, once the domain of faculty, review of courses has now become external and vested in state regulatory agencies.

Efforts by Florida's legislators to have extensive control over university curricula can have extreme consequences. For example, in 2024 a student at Florida International University complained about antisemitic content in a textbook test bank. Ordinarily, such a complaint would be reviewed by a faculty committee to determine whether the textbook should not be used and whether the course using it or others in the curriculum contained antisemitic bias. In this case, however, a state senator heard about the complaint and convinced the State Department of Education to intervene. The resulting action involved [examining curricular databases](#) at all state universities for the key words: *Israel, Israeli, Palestine, Palestinian, Middle East, Zionism, Zionist, Judaism, Jewish, and Jews*. Over 250 courses were examined for "antisemitism or anti-Israeli bias," with the requirement that any instances be reported to the chancellor's office (Moray, 2024). Such examination and reporting has become common.

Also through HB266, Florida's lawmakers have encouraged a preference for the "western canon" in courses taught at the state's public universities and have called for an emphasis on the great ideas and writings originating from Europe and America, stressing "the principles, ideals, and institutions of the American political order" and "[civic education](#)" (Higher Education, 2023, ll. 416-417). Giving so much weight to these ideas would minimize consideration of viewpoints and accomplishments of other cultures in the US and internationally. In reaction to the legislation, a professor of English at Florida State University [commented](#), "I'm someone that spends all my time thinking about what the canon means. So for some politician or some businessman to come in and say that they know is just really strange" (Pettit and Zahneis, 2025, para. 75).

Legislators' desire to have universities emphasize the Western canon has led to the establishment of centers outside the normal faculty-led process for establishing such units. HB266 renames the Florida Institute of Politics at Florida State University as the Florida Institute for Governance and Civics, and the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education was established at the University of Florida. Both centers are designed to follow the legislation's directives to focus on the western canon and civic education. The [purpose](#) here is to reshape higher education to meet certain political and ideological goals, including countering perceived liberal bias in academia (Shanley, 2024). In the three years since its founding, the Hamilton center has created new courses such as The Politics of Nature, The End of Empires: Imperialism to Decolonization, and God and Science. When they were designed, the University of Florida did not require the Hamilton Center's director to go through the usual university curriculum approval process, and the faculty who served as instructors were appointed [without the approval](#) of the relevant academic departments, such as History and Political Science (Patel & Harris, 2025). This establishment of the Hamilton Center outside of the normal organizational location within a college and its

offering of unapproved courses that compete for student enrollment with approved ones has led to conflict and demands from the administration that the other faculty sign letters indicating that they will cooperate with the Center's mission ([Pettit, 2024](#); [Shanley, 2024](#)).

All of these restrictions and forced changes in emphasis have diminished the role of faculty expertise in determining the content of the curriculum.

Legislative Impact on General Education Courses

In addition to restricting course content, HB266 contains regulatory language about another previous faculty-determined action: the designation of certain courses as “core courses” or courses that would fulfil “general education requirements” ([Higher Education, 2023](#)). Such courses are selected by faculty and university administrators as entry-level courses that teach students the methods of inquiry used by certain disciplines and provide key examples of content from that area, such as a survey course on world history, concepts of introductory biology, or readings in German literature. Because all students are required to select from the list of general education courses, these courses enroll more students than higher-level electives that are more specialized and intended for majors in specific areas. These high-enrolling general education courses thus subsidize the electives and often, also graduate students or adjunct faculty who teach sections of the general education courses, enabling full-time faculty to devote time to research. The state intervention into the process, then, has had multiple impacts.

A key source of pressure from government officials in designating courses for the core curriculum has been alignment with the content ideas expressed in HB7 and HB266. In January 2024 the Board of Governors and the State Department of Education decided to remove Principles of Sociology from Florida's general education core requirements and replace it with the [“factual” history course, *Introductory Survey to 1877*](#) (State University System of Florida, 2024). Then Florida Commissioner of Higher Education, Manny Diaz, [insisted](#), “Sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its purpose as a general knowledge course for students. Florida's higher education system will focus on preparing students for high-demand, high-wage jobs, not woke¹ ideology” (Hartocollis, 2024, para. 9). Governor DeSantis and state education officials have repeatedly criticized sociology as indoctrination rather than education, and many sociology courses have been eliminated from general education requirements in all state universities in Florida. What followed this action was a Board of Governors review of **all** general education courses offered in **all** of Florida's state colleges and universities.

As a result of this pressure, [hundreds of courses](#) that had previously qualified as general education courses were removed from the list of student options to meet this requirement. At Florida State University alone, 432 of 571 general education courses were removed including *Theories of African American Studies*, *Evolution of Human Sexuality*, and *LBGTQ History*. In like manner the state's involvement in the curriculum process has

led to weeding out courses such as *Anthropology of Race & Ethnicity*, *Sociology of Gender*, and *Women in Literature* (Pettit & Zahneis, 2025).

Removal of so many courses from the general education list has a negative impact on the structure of universities. A faculty member at Florida International University [concluded](#):

As [courses] are removed from the core curriculum, you're going to see an artificial enrollment crater that's being manufactured by the Board of Governors. This has long-term implications, not only for the health of departments, but for the very existence of departments such as sociology, anthropology, women and gender studies, African American and diaspora studies. These are all programs whose very existence could be called into question in the future" (Moody, 2024, para. 31).

A prime example of the elimination of departments and fields of study is occurred in the case of New College, the liberal arts member of the State University System when, in January 2023, Governor DeSantis used his authority to appoint new trustees and New College's president in an effort to counter the perceived bias of its faculty and curriculum. The elimination of the gender studies department and wholesale restructuring of the humanities curriculum [followed](#) (Mazzei, 2023). Calling this instance of government intervention a "blueprint for future encroachments on public colleges and universities across the country," the American Association of University Professors added New College to its list of [sanctioned institutions](#) in 2024 (AAUP, 2024).

Intervention in the Assessment of Curriculum

An additional way in which Florida's government is focusing on the curriculum of its public universities is the recent creation by Governor DeSantis of the [Commission for Public Higher Education](#) (CPHE), a newly launched nonprofit, multi-state institutional accreditor created by six Southern U.S. public university systems (Executive Office of the Governor, 2025). CPHE offers an alternative to existing regional accrediting bodies that are certified at the national level. These [regional associations](#), such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), the most common accrediting body for southern states, grant accreditation status that is critical to postsecondary institutions. Accreditations are based on peer assessment of the quality of degree-granting colleges. The standards for judging the quality of curriculum by outside reviewers are composed by faculty peers and their professional associations. Every accrediting team that visits campuses at regular intervals is composed of faculty and administrators from other institutions. It is unknown at this point if the CPHE will continue the tradition of faculty engagement and impartial assessment to offer an improved education for Florida college students or will simply intensify state control over the faculty and curriculum.

In summary, many observers foresee that government actions that disregard established disciplinary knowledge and faculty competencies could foreshadow the end of public education as we understand it. A faculty member at Florida International University [commented](#) that these efforts intend “to dismantle higher education and impose ideological agendas and to impose state censorship on what can be taught within public higher education systems that’s being directed from the highest levels of state government” (Moody, 2024, para. 28).

Conclusion: Why Faculty Control of Curriculum Matters

Faculty control over curriculum is based on a long tradition of entrusting decisions about the content of teaching and learning to those who have advanced expertise in a disciplinary area. Faculty are required by the standards of their peers to teach material that is accurate, up-to-date, and tailored to the mission of their institutions and needs of their student bodies. When non-experts intervene, they introduce the possibility of bias, misinformation, and restrictions to open inquiry. What results is an education system that produces students who have not been exposed to full and accurate information and censure by external peers. An additional critical issue, particularly related to government control of the curriculum, is the low faculty morale and environment of distrust and fear that results. The passage of HB266 and HR7, as well as actions by Florida’s Governor and the Board of Governors of the State University System, have intruded upon faculty decision making in dramatic and dangerous ways that have altered the quality of education in Florida’s universities.

Recommendations

To restore and maintain the integrity of curriculum in Florida’s universities, it is important that:

- Control of courses and programs must be vested in the faculty and not the political leaders of the state;
- Faculty must shoulder the responsibility for seeing that students’ learning experiences are consistent with the professional knowledge base of the discipline to which they are exposed, whether it is Sociology or Physics, History or Engineering;
- The primary objective of faculty in curriculum decisions is to expand the minds of the students, teaching them how to think critically and creatively, not to control what students think;
- Academic departments create course requirements and course content derived from evidence-based scholarship from their respective academic disciplines;

- Control of the selection of courses for fulfilling general education requirements at Florida's universities is vested in established procedures of peer review and approval rather than state legislation;
- Centers and institutes should be created with the involvement and oversight of faculty at the institution within which they are housed;
- Assessment of curricula at Florida's universities must be conducted by accrediting institutions that are operated according to unbiased peer review principles to mirror Thomas Jefferson's revolutionary vision, curriculum development should be controlled by the learned faculty, not by church or state.

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Note

¹According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2025) the word *woke* has been a part of the English language for at least 1,000 years and can best be described as the past tense of *wake*. In response to the question, “When did you wake up” one might answer, “I woke up at 7 a.m.,” indicating a return to consciousness.

In African American English (AAE), staying *woke* evolved by the 1920s to mean staying awake not just physically, but also socially and politically. (Merriam-Webster 2025) In 1938, the musician Lead Belly (Huddie Ledbetter) advised people to “stay *woke*” – meaning stay alert to racial injustice, including lynchings of Blacks by Whites. The use of *woke* was also common in activist circles such as *Black Lives Matter*: for example: “Stay *woke*, Brother!”

More recently, the word *woke* has been adapted by politicians for purposes of public ridicule. Saying that something is *woke* is an expression of disdain with no specific meaning and is culturally insensitive. Unfortunately, *woke* has crept into the language of Florida’s leadership and, in this case, has been used to undermine and condemn longstanding, well-researched curricula.

Investigating the Impact of Anti-DEI Legislation on Florida's University Students

Jill Lewis-Spector

Background: Student Activism on Campus

Protests on America's university campuses are not new. In the 1920's Fisk University students protested when its President, Fayette McKenzie, shut down the student newspaper and abolished the student council in response to university donors' demands that students be made to abide by Jim Crow laws. Campus anti-Vietnam War activism ranged from draft resistance to freeway marches and the tragic shootings at Kent State in Ohio. Recent "die-ins" on campuses demanded gun control reform. Today's university students have been protesting Israel's attacks on Gaza, the overturning of Roe v. Wade, and deportation of their fellow international students.

While some protests at Florida's universities have been about these same issues, others have been in opposition to [recent legislation](#) that has affected students' education and university experience (Rasura & Vargas, 2023). [Senate Bill 266](#), signed into law in 2023, prohibits the states' public universities from using any state or federal funding to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) programs and organizations. Course offerings built around ideas of racism, oppression, or sexism have been terminated. Funding has been cut to non-conservative activist groups on campus, such as the National Organization for Women. Social and political activism is prohibited. Students aware of the legislation are objecting to the limitations and hope the purpose of their demonstrations will be understood. As one student protesting against repressive legislation remarked,

This bill affects our identities — all of our pride students, Hispanic students, Black students — [we're all affected](#) by this type of legislation, and so being out here, we want to make sure our voices are heard, and we know that we won't be listened to. (Akers, 2023, para. 9)

In 2022, the United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit ruled against the University of Central Florida's discriminatory-harassment policy, and declared of universities and colleges that their "chief mission...is [to equip students](#) to examine arguments critically and, perhaps even more importantly, to prepare young citizens to participate in the civic and political life of our democratic republic" (Speech First, Inc. v. Cartwright, 2022, p. 37). After the passage of SB266, ACLU filed a complaint in January 2025 (Austin v. Lamb) against the state, arguing,

Continuing its effort to police the marketplace of ideas, the Florida Legislature passed again passed vague, viewpoint-discriminatory legislation that broadly restricts academic freedom and imposes the state's

avored viewpoints on public higher education, punishing educators and students for expressing [differing and disfavored viewpoints](#). (Kam, 2025, para. 3)

Similar restrictions are now being imposed at the Federal level through President Trump's Executive Orders, such as The *Dismantle DEI Act of 2025* ([S382](#)) that, if passed by Congress, will enshrine DEI prohibitions at all public universities in the country and will withhold funding from private universities that engage in DEI (S.382 – 119th Congress, 2025). Students are now demonstrating against both Governor DeSantis and the Trump administration.

We don't know yet how actions at the federal level or potential outcomes of lawsuits will affect Florida's university students, but it has been two years since Florida signed [SB266](#) into law, and we are now able to identify how these state-driven reforms now in place have affected university students' experiences and education (Higher Education, 2023).

DEI Restrictions Are Problematic for Students

Risks To Student Safety

Considered from a student development perspective, [SB266](#) is problematic because already marginalized groups of students, especially Black and Brown students, students belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, neurodiverse students, and those with learning challenges are feeling that they and their experiences don't matter. By ending DEI initiatives at Florida's universities, including affirmative action programs and organizations designed as a welcoming place for these students, the state's universities may increasingly become segregated breeding grounds for discrimination and hatred for these already vulnerable students, unsafe places where they may be harmed.

Risks To Development of Critical and Creative Thinking

Additionally, restricting curriculum, areas of study, classroom discussion, even exposure to faculty with diverse points of view, limit students' access to complete information. It's like deciding which car to buy but being shown only half the models available. As a legal Complaint against [SB266](#) noted, "The marketplace of ideas cannot thrive if politicians simply declare a significant [number of ideas to be off-limits for discussion or debate in colleges and universities](#)" (NCF Freedom, 2023, p. 62). While the complaint was voluntarily dismissed by the plaintiffs due to procedural issues and lack of standing, this argument still rings true.

Most freshmen begin attending a university immediately after graduating high school, typically between ages 17-19, when it's important for them to learn how to examine

arguments and ideas for their validity and how they align or contrast with their own beliefs. This examination requires students' exposure to multiple perspectives where they can study, judge and integrate competing information, ideas and opinions to arrive at what could be considered knowledge. But this knowledge is tentative and subject to change. As their experiences mature and knowledge develops, university students begin to appreciate that there is the possibility of there being more than one set of *right* answers to complex questions, even to their own conclusions that they had previously held (Perry, 1981). Florida's legislation stunts this maturation.

Prohibitions on academic discourse also stifle creative thinking, which flourishes in open environments where thinking "outside the box" is encouraged, even praised. It allows us to be open minded enough to consider solutions to problems from different points of view. Creativity drives innovation. The product creators who appear on the popular TV program *Shark Tank* are perfect examples of how it's possible to develop interesting solutions to common or even complex problems. Students who are told what to think, e.g. "[Instruction includes how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit](#)" found in Florida's 2023 Academic Standards for Social Studies (Florida Department of Education, 2023, p.6) and whose education denies them access to multiple perspectives will be limited in their ability to think creatively. In the workplace, they will have difficulty participating in brainstorming ideas with colleagues or thinking of unconventional ways to solve work challenges.

Risks To Ability to Collaborate in Diverse Workplaces

Florida's university DEI restrictions also keep students from understanding individuals whose life experiences, cultural norms and values, religions, ethnicities, sexual orientation differ from their own, but whose workplace demographics may necessitate collaboration and conflict resolution with a diverse community. Rather than legislating a message that suggests that some ideologies, skin colors, ethnicities or physical abilities are preferable to others, we need to be encouraging students to respect, recognize and appreciate the benefit we all receive from the diversity that enriches Florida.

Florida's universities have the potential to increase students' capacity to engage in challenging conversations with others who are unlike themselves. Their failings in this regard will affect family life or personal goals of those Floridians educated in our state.

Why Should Floridians Be Concerned?

When all efforts for welcoming and supporting marginalized students are deliberately obliterated from campus life and education, when their history is denied and discussion on topics related to their lived experience are prohibited, these students are being set up for failure. Why should they participate in a community that deems them

essentially invisible? We risk losing them as valuable contributing members of society.

Consider some of the recent issues your community has addressed. Perhaps town halls or forums were held to discuss affordable housing, childcare options, hurricane response, challenges to the local ecosystem. Will individuals educated with a narrow curriculum, rather than one that is comprehensive, be equipped for informed political participation where they are willing to listen to different opinions and capable of evaluating them for their contribution to community wellness? Similarly, will elected officials with restricted education backgrounds be able to provide creative solutions to complex problems or to consider the needs of a diverse community whose residents bring different perspectives to the issue? Self-interest, not community interest, might drive their decision making, especially if their ideas have never been challenged and they have never had to consider the needs, desires, and expectations of individuals who are unlike themselves. What happens to trust between neighbors who don't look, pray, or even dress like you when you've had no education about inclusiveness or development of cultural awareness? Will the idea of community be lost? As reported by the League of Women Voters of Florida,

educational prohibitions on teaching complete truths and the attempt at homogenization of the school curriculum and instructional approach lead to community fractures where residents are unable to communicate with each other or appreciate how each contributes to the [community's well-being](#). (Lewis-Spector, Campbell-Gabor, & Mann, 2022, p. 4)

What Are Those Most Affected Saying About DEI Restrictions?

Florida's Board of Governors Diversity Viewpoint Survey

An early sign of the state government's desire to influence university ideology occurred in March and April 2022 when Florida's Board of Governors disseminated its Intellectual Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity Survey to students and employees at all 12 of the state's public universities, "designed to assess respondents' comfort levels and willingness to share views in a range of settings, including classrooms, at a university event, online, and within non-university [social settings](#)" (Florida Board of Governors, p. 3). Students were asked to respond to such questions as the political leanings of their professors, how comfortable they were sharing their political opinions, and how well the university promotes diverse political viewpoints. There was just "a 2% response rate" (op cit, p. 5). A graduate student and leader at one university offered,

Why would a government track the 'views' of their [student] body if not to attempt to manipulate those views? ... This survey is not neutral in any sense of the word and was created with the express purpose of limiting academic expression on [college campus](#). (Pickett, 2025, para. 6)

Employees were also surveyed with different questions. While their results were slightly higher (9%), the Chancellor for higher education reported both the student and employee surveys are “statistically invalid”, too small to be considered truly representative of the [environment at Florida’s universities](#) (Rodriguez, 2024, p. 1).

The survey for 2023 was suspended and the 2024 survey, sent to students and faculty via email, fared better. Perhaps because there was an incentive consisting of a drawing for five \$500 bookstore coupons to students who completed the survey, 14.53% of students enrolled in the state’s university system responded and faculty responses [increased to 12.26%](#) (Pickett, 2025). Possibly, too, the university demographics might have changed resulting in a larger portion of students holding conservative viewpoints, as more liberal students are selecting a university [in another state](#) (Intelligent.com, 2023, para. 14).

What Are We Hearing From Students?

We can better understand the legislation’s impact on the learning and social climate at Florida’s public universities by investigating how students feel the laws that resulted from [SB 266](#) have affected them. To accomplish this, interviews were conducted in Spring 2025 with upper classmen at public universities across Florida who had been at their university since 2022 or 2023 and would be aware of changes on their campus over the last few years. Those interviewed were primarily leaders of student government or another campus organization, affording them a broader perspective on shifts in academics and other features of campus life after the restrictions went into effect.

Twenty student government presidents/vice presidents at Florida’s 12 public universities were contacted via email with a request for an interview. The email explained the purpose of the interview was to determine the impact of recent Florida legislation, e.g. SB266/HB999, on our state’s public universities. They were also told the results of the interview would be anonymous and that their comments would not be linked to their university. Two students referred by colleagues were also contacted a request for an interview and were provided the same information. In all, 14 students responded, accepting the interview and representing 6 of Florida’s public universities. One student who had been referred by a colleague later declined, but this did not change the number of universities represented. In all, thirteen interviews were conducted between March and May 2025, with each last approximately 30 minutes.

Each interviewee was given opportunity to respond to the same set of questions:

- Please confirm the name of the university you currently attend.
- What leadership roles, if any, do you have at your university?

- How are students learning about some of the recent regulations and executive orders directed at higher education curriculum, campus organizations and clubs, university libraries, university governance, etc.
- What changes have you noticed, or have others reported as noticing this year as compared to last year, and how has this affected their college experience with regard to
 - Campus environment
 - Campus events
 - Diversity of opinion
- What changes have you noticed, or have others reported as noticing in the classroom environment this year as compared to last year, and how this has affected their learning/motivation.
- How much of the change you or others are noticing would you attribute to recent regulations and executive orders directed at higher education?
- Have you or has anyone you know been concerned about whether to continue with their chosen majors/minors? (Follow up – why the concern.)
- What would you like to see change on your campus? How could this happen?

Each was also asked whether there was any additional information they wanted to provide. Nearly all were appreciative of the opportunity to discuss the campus DEI situation.

Although the political leanings of the interviewed students were not identified, concerns they expressed were either left-of-center or progressive. This study would have benefitted from hearing conservative student voices. Many efforts were made including reaching out to such campus organizations as Turning Point on several campuses and Young Americans for Freedom at the University of Florida, as well as personal contacts with conservative graduates from Florida's public universities. Seven of Florida's public universities have chapters of College Republicans, including FAMU's, which is the only active chapter in the country of College Republicans at an HBCU. But no conservative students responded to this author's requests for interviews. Seeking more student voices, every public university's student newspaper was searched for student responses to the legislation and both findings from the interviews and the student newspapers are provided here.

Students acted immediately after the legislation was passed. In Spring 2022, members of the University of Florida Student Senate passed its *Resolution Condemning the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill* (Adekunle, et al, 2022). It also passed several in 2023 including the Resolution Condemning Florida House Bill 1069 and the Censorship, Restriction, and Removal of Educational [Resources from Florida Schools](#) (Gangano, A. 2023). These were typically distributed as templates to Student Senate Presidents across Florida's public university system. According to the University of Florida's 2023 Student Senate President, “Some resolutions pass as an expression of sentiment, while others might lead to action [on behalf of the entity that receives it](#)” (Serret, 2023). When Florida's Board of Governors met on November 9, 2023 to vote on regulations in accordance with [SB266](#),

many students expressed strong opposition to them, but to no avail, and the consequences are evident in students' comments when they are interviewed by the press as well as in their own Letters to the Editor and commentaries that appear in their student newspapers, substantiated by recent student interviews conducted as part of this study. Reacting to the survey described earlier, one interviewee commented that these were viewed by many students as attempts to encourage "snitching" on people for their political views.

Underrepresented students clearly now feel extremely marginalized at their universities where they were once offered a space to be who they are. A student speaking with a Florida A&M University student reporter shared,

this is where I've finally found a place where I truly feel seen and supported academically. The idea that DEI programs, which make that possible, could be taken away? It feels like an attack on what makes this in FAMU. I'm worried about how it'll impact resources, student support and the conversations we have about [inclusion and identity](#). (London, 2025, para. 6)

Florida's LGBTQ+ university students were often harassed prior to the passage of [SB266](#). "A [2017 survey of students](#) at the University of West Florida, for instance, found that 28.2% of LGBTQ students reported one or more experiences of derogatory treatment based on sexual orientation in the prior year" (Mallory, et al, p.3). In March 2024 a court ruling regarding HB1557 "nullified the most dangerous and discriminatory impacts of Florida's [controversial Don't Say Gay Law](#)" (Equality Florida, 2024, para, 2). It did not permit discrimination against members of the LGBTQ+ community. Yet a study conducted for a Florida university Honors Undergraduate Thesis found that LGBTQ+ college students "no longer felt comfortable openly vocalizing their sexual and gender identity [and some] have witnessed a rise in discrimination and violence towards [same-sex couples](#)" (Sriram, 2024, p.18).

Interviewed students echoed these feelings, noting that some of their peers were more familiar with the legislation than others. They reported that the universities issue statements regarding pertinent changes resulting from the legislation, although social media, especially student newspapers and student-run Instagram, Twitter and TikTok accounts, played a more important role in their learning about and responding to it. Letters to the Editor and social media were the primary platforms for student discussion. Students For a Democratic Society (SDS) and similar groups have also been active in spreading awareness and organizing protests. Interviewees often spoke of students being "fearful" or "anxious" with one commenting that "bullies are louder now, there's more open racism, and students are more scared." They described international students as "frightened." Another observed an

(increased feeling of sadness and "trauma bonding" among students in affected departments and that extreme conservative groups, such as Turning Point USA, are more visible on campus while more progressive ones, such as SDS, are seemingly being targeted by campus police. There's also been a decrease in visibility of Pride flags and other diversity-related displays. On at least one campus, students are forbidden to have Pride flags displayed on their dorm room windows. A student commented that this felt particularly repressive and unfair, that students were paying for their dorm rooms and should be able to decorate them as they wanted.

It was also reported that events have become more politicized, with some students commenting that there have been more right-leaning events than in the past. Several expressed concern about the significant loss of funding for student organizations, particularly those representing minority groups. Those serving on student government indicated that it is supported by student fees, so they have more independence than other organizations and can thus support some DEI initiatives, such as hosting multicultural events that were previously held by other organizations. But their funds are limited and cannot provide the same level of support previously available.

Interviewees frequently commented that the mood on campus was "somber" and "fearful" and expressed concern about students' declining mental health. A student from one of Florida's mid-sized public universities commented on an increased need for mental health services. This should have been anticipated. "Policies that promote discrimination lead to poorer mental health among targeted populations; policies that protect historically marginalized populations from discrimination and oppression lead to [better mental health outcomes](#)" (Shim, 2025, para. 9). Florida's university students who once had access to DEI programs and university-funded organizations focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion have been eliminated. These spaces where students knew they would be able to interact with others like themselves are now absent, leaving many feeling isolated and targeted. In 2023, "[Florida ranked #1](#) in the nation with nearly 3 million adults, or 17.49%, experiencing a mental illness" (Florida Hospital Association, 2023, p. 2).

The Director of the University of Central Florida's Counseling and Psychological Services Center (CAPS) reported that of the students seeking their services during the 2022-2023 academic year "anxiety continues to be the most common presenting problem followed by [stress and depression](#) (tied)" (University of Central Florida, 2023, p.1). The director of the Black Student Union's welcome assembly at the University of Florida said, "It's a big reason that I stayed at this university. The connections I made, the experiences I had, that I only would have known about if I had [gone to that assembly](#)" (Thai, 2025, para. 11). Absent these identity-based assemblies, it is more difficult to have a sense of belonging.

A Florida Atlantic University student with similar concerns told a student newspaper reporter, “I used to want to be a high school history teacher, but now being a transgender person in any form of public education is [scarier than it was before](#) [the recent bills]” (Mermet & Quintero, 2023, para. 6). Florida Gulf Coast University student reporters discussing the potential impact of another repressive bill, HB999, explain, “As for students studying majors that may be endangered by HB 999, like Jewish studies, gender studies and critical theory, answers on their future are [nowhere to be found](#)” (Rodriguez, E. & Stewart, 2023, para.11).

Interviews with university students revealed these same concerns. Several knew students who transferred to other institutions because of Florida’s limits on degree offerings, or resignations of faculty who taught in such areas as women studies or African American studies. One observed that enrollment in some diversity-focused courses, e.g. Latino Women Writers, had recently increased since such courses might be unavailable in the future. They also reported a change in the classroom environment where conservative students were now speaking out more often, but faculty appeared wary of engaging in discussion of controversial subjects, especially race-related issues, and this limited students’ opportunities for critical exchange of ideas. Interestingly, another shared that conservative students tend to be more vocal in business classes, while progressive students dominate literature classes.

There has been close scrutiny of course syllabi. A student reported that there is a new syllabus disclaimer that reads, “No lesson is intended to espouse, promote, advance, inculcate, or compel a particular feeling, perception, viewpoint, or belief.” The author was able to verify that this does appear on multiple syllabi for courses at Florida’s universities, especially in the social sciences. Some students mentioned the *simple syllabus* that is now being used by faculty for putting course syllabi online, many of which are available for public comment. One complained, “It’s just crazy the way this is being monitored” and proceeded to point out how a word search on a syllabus could lead to a class being cancelled even though when the word was found, e.g. *transition*, it had to do with *product transition*, not people. Students are feeling uncertain about the future, with some worried about losing scholarships and research or internship opportunities due to the new regulations. A few indicated they are less inclined to participate in student activism because of potential consequences to their future.

Conclusion

When [SB266](#) became law, the education and experiences of Florida’s university students became fractured. Governor DeSantis and loyalists in the state legislature imposed an ideological framework on the university system that did not align easily with many students’ expectations of their university experiences and education. Students are

torn between protesting loudly and tiptoeing into classrooms where professors are self-censoring instructional content to avoid being caught in the crosshairs of an obedient university administration. Those students who have experienced the pre-/post-legislation shift are well aware of how their campuses have changed. Some are heartbroken; others are afraid. None could possibly know the body of ideas that could have been shared with them but were not. It will be some time before we know the cost.

Recommendations

In an ideal world Florida's public universities would take a stronger stance against injustice, improve communication and collaboration between students, faculty, and staff, and foster a more inclusive and supportive campus environment. But they are dependent on funding from those same lawmakers who have legislated restrictions on what experiences students can have on their campuses and to what ideas they can be exposed. This is understood and the recommendations offered are, thus, ones that might be possible within these constraints. Universities should

- be transparent about the limitations they and students are facing and communicate to students as laws change or new regulations are approved;
- engage students in open and compassionate dialogue;
- offer forums to increase student awareness about state-level decisions affecting university policies, resources, and curriculum, and student activities;
- encourage both progressive and conservative students to respectfully share their opinions through such vehicles as the student newspaper;
- provide more support for students struggling with their mental health;
- elevate student voices when policies affecting their university experiences and education are proposed by policymakers;
- monitor ongoing impacts of restrictions on course offerings and campus activities and share findings with students and policymakers;
- support student-led initiatives whenever possible to maintain a diverse and inclusive campus environment.

Such efforts could ease students' anxiety and assure them that they are seen and heard.

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How Has Anti-DEI Legislation Impacted Florida's University Libraries?

Marjorie Rohrbach

Background

As every librarian knows, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion are fundamental values of the American Library Association and its members. Whether a librarian serves in a small rural public library, a magnificent city library like the New York Public Library, an elementary school library, or an academic library at a major university, the goal is the same: to help patrons find the information and resources they need. As Martha J. Spear, library media specialist stated in her article, *Top Ten Reasons to Be a Librarian*, “We champion the right to access information for all people, regardless of race, creed, religion, or [economic disposition](#)” (2006, para.12).

However, Florida's recent diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation has threatened to fundamentally transform the landscape of academic libraries across the state. Since Governor Ron DeSantis signed [Senate Bill 266](#) in May 2023, prohibiting state funding for DEI programs, Florida's public universities have eliminated millions in funding, cut dozens of positions, and fundamentally altered how libraries develop collections and serve students. This section of our report examines the concrete impacts on library operations, staffing, collections, and services, revealing a system under significant pressure that affects both library professionals and the students they serve.

Association of Colleges and Research Libraries (ACRL)'s 2024 Perspective on Anti-DEI Legislation

A 2024 report by ACRL, a division of the American Library Association, titled [Top Trends in Academic Libraries](#), identifies anti-DEI legislation as a major challenge for academic librarians. It highlights how some states have also severed ties with the American Library Association amid allegations of left-leaning bias, creating a particularly challenging environment for library professionals. Importantly, ACRL connects this to broader academic freedom concerns, noting “[a]lthough censorship of library collections using “book bans” has primarily affected public libraries, academic libraries now find they too are being drawn into this heated dialogue, especially surrounding social justice, DEI, and antiracism initiatives” (ACRL Research Planning and Review Committee, 2024, para. 21).

Florida has more than 150 academic libraries associated with its public colleges and universities. What follows is an examination of the effects of the DEI legislation on the libraries at four public universities: University of Florida, University of Central Florida, University of South Florida, and Florida State University. Each has faced challenges and

has responded differently, based on how they have interpreted the legislation and the support from the university's administration.

University of Florida - Most Dramatic Changes

The University of Florida (UF) has implemented the most extensive changes among the four institutions. In March 2024, UF eliminated 13 full-time DEI positions and ended 15 administrative appointments, reallocating about \$5 million previously designated for diversity programs to a faculty recruitment fund. The university closed its Office of the Chief Diversity Officer and halted DEI-focused contracts with outside vendors with affected employees receiving 12 weeks of [severance pay](#) (The Washington Post, 2024).

The *UF Alligator* coverage provides a detailed breakdown of how these changes specifically affected academic libraries. The key finding is that while the \$5 million in DEI funding originally for UF libraries was reallocated and distributed across various university functions, libraries apparently maintained their core operations, with the Marston Science Library continuing to serve as a study [space for students](#) (Thomas, 2024).

However, the elimination of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Librarian position, held by Twanna Hodge, reveals a deeper impact. Hodge once described her role as “including the development of a comprehensive and strategic DEI program, which incorporates helping the UF Libraries’ team members recognize, understand, value, and embrace their differences as crucial to their [communal work](#)” (Hodge, 2022, para. 1).

The fact that Hodge recently departed to continue her studies at University of Maryland suggests Florida lost specialized library expertise in diversity and inclusion – another kind of brain drain experts had predicted about the effects of DEI laws. Without Hodge, UF library collections of scholarly works on diversity and inclusion may be incomplete.

The impact of DEI restrictions extends beyond administrative changes. Academic libraries support the research needs of faculty and students. Professors report losing funding for research presentations. One UF professor, Sharon Auston, who lost general education status for two courses she taught (The Politics of Race and Black Horror and Social Justice), was also denied funding in 2024 to present at an academic conference that the school had previously funded. The state law was [cited as justification](#) (Saunders, 2025). Such actions disincentivizes research and reduces academic libraries’ support for faculty and students.

In a 2024 article coauthored by several librarians, each documents how they have been affected, including professional challenges, personal consequences, and small acts of resistance and are “learning to navigate the uncharted waters of intensifying retrenchment politics in their [day-to-day work](#)” (Birch, et al., 2024, p.104). One coauthor, University of Florida librarian Michelle M. Nolan, reports that Florida's academic library

community is actively documenting and sharing strategies for operating under these restrictions. Nolan shares,

Statewide anti-DEI reactionary politics have caused a palpably chilling effect on Florida higher education... I have observed a significant shift in our libraries towards a culture of anticipatory obedience, where colleagues fear the most draconian interpretations of the law will be enforced and act accordingly. As much as my colleagues have expressed wanting to continue doing DEI-focused outreach, the prevailing sentiment seems to be that we must weather the storm and stay off the radar of those who truly mean to eliminate DEI programs from [public higher education](#). (Birch, et al., 2024, p.107)

Nolan further explains that some of the results have been self-censorship and rebranding previous initiatives to decenter the DEI focus. What was previously celebrated has now been demonized. According to Nolan, librarians have an important role to play at this moment.

While the greater university pulls back from DEI, students are looking to our library spaces as places of safety and comfort amidst a hostile learning environment. They are looking to library workers to see how our dedication to DEI holds up against state pressure to [comply or self-censor](#). (Birch, et al., 2024, p.107)

The most striking personal account in the coauthored article comes from Stephanie Birch, a pre-tenured Black Studies librarian and former African American Studies Librarian at the University of Florida. She is a founding member of the Critical Race Theory Collective (CRTC) who ultimately "made the difficult decision to [resign and relocate](#) to the University of Connecticut" (Birch, et al., 2024, p.105).

Birch describes how Florida's restrictions created an untenable professional environment. After becoming "increasingly worried that I could be denied tenure—not because of the quality of my work but the content, [she] joined Florida's 'brain drain'—the [mass exodus of faculty](#) and scholars from the state of Florida" (Birch, et al., 2024, p.105).

Her experience shows the personal cost: "As a solo parent raising a Black, queer, and disabled child, I was doubly concerned about my ability to continue providing for them while also keeping them safe in an increasingly [hostile political environment](#)" (Birch, et al., 2024, p.105).

Birch's account reveals how academic work, including her own work, became weaponized for political purposes. She describes recognizing an infographic from the University of Florida Libraries' website on a Fox News segment titled DEI Lessons Teach Our Kids to Hate Themselves and Their Country. "I instantly recognized the image because I

had made it when I served as chair of the [Libraries' DEI committee](#)" (Birch, et al., 2024, p.104).

Routine library diversity work became fodder for political attacks, making librarians targets simply for doing their professional duties. The tense environment at the University of Florida and response of librarians is clearly a result of the pressure caused by anti-DEI demands. The coauthored article concludes with Nolan's advice to librarians:

I encourage all library workers facing state repression to find similar ways to get creative and have our students' backs because it is more important than ever for libraries to remain the loudest defenders of marginalized students and [intellectual freedom](#). (Birch, et al., 2024, p. 108)

University of Central Florida (UCF) - Proactive Compliance

UCF eliminated its Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion position and renamed its DEI program to the Department of Access and Community Engagement, while eliminating vacant positions related to diversity training. However, UCF's approach appears [more measured than UF's](#) (Prieur, 2024).

According to Courtney Gilmartin, Assistant VP of Strategic Initiatives and Communications, prior to the legislation UCF had "already initiated an approach to refocus resources on increasing access to opportunity for students and [they were] largely in compliance with the law and BOG regulation when [they took effect](#)" (Downer, 2024, para. 3). The university emphasized that student-fee funded clubs and initiatives continue operating normally since the legislation [doesn't impact them](#) (Downer, 2024).

Notably, UCF Libraries completed a comprehensive strategic planning process in 2024, publishing new strategic directions for 2024-2027 that emphasize "boundless learning" and "redefining the [library experience](#)" (Vacek, et al., 2024), suggesting the libraries are actively positioning themselves for the future despite broader institutional changes.

Despite this proactive stance, the absence of DEI positions may have consequences for all of Florida's university libraries, including UCF. University libraries frequently considered purchases based on student and faculty interest and research. Input from DEI offices would often be sought, and libraries would provide access to diverse materials and databases. Workshops, lectures and cultural celebrations were sometimes co-hosted, raising community awareness and exposure to [diverse perspectives](#) (EBSCO, n.d.). Thus, with DEI offices shut, the academic libraries' role and connection to university faculty and students changed.

University of South Florida (USF) – Transitions Underway

USF phased out its Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, with five staff members transitioning to different roles within the university. The Vice President of DEI position, which had been vacant for some time, [will not be filled](#) (Bowman, 2024).

USF Faculty Senate President raised her concerns at a Board of Trustees meeting the about external consequences of responses to DEI legislation and regulations, noting that "the impact of those decisions are not just internal, they're happening external, and it affects the way that we recruit and retain all of our students, and [also our faculty](#)" (Bowman, 2024, para. 7). This suggests ongoing concerns about reputational effects on recruitment and retention.

The USF Libraries Information Commons & Library Services, Sarasota-Manatee is one of three libraries in the USF library system. In 2023 the introduction to the Digital Commons at USF, an open-access publishing program, began with this statement:

Digital Commons @ University of South Florida, a service of the University of South Florida (USF) Libraries, embraces USF's values of cultural and ethnic diversity and global understanding. USF is committed to an academic community of free inquiry not limited by race, ethnicity, veteran status, marital status, socioeconomic level, national origin, religious belief, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, class, political ideology, or gender identity and expression. It recognizes the benefits of uniqueness, similarities, [and differences](#). (University of South Florida Libraries, 2023, para.1)

This introduction for the open-access repository suggests that authors:

- Write a diversity and inclusion statement for the publication.
- Encourage participation of people from underrepresented groups as authors, reviewers, and editors.
- Include content from multidisciplinary scholars that fits publication scope.
- Create an editorial board that reflects the diversity of a global academic community.
- Maintain a clear and open process for article [review and contribution](#). (University of South Florida Libraries, 2023, para. 4)

These statements, not able to be located through a search at the current website for USF's Digital Commons, have been replaced and the substitute introduction for USF's Digital Commons now reads:

The collections include historical sources and scholarship from many cultures and time periods, and the content or its descriptions may be

graphic or reflect biases. In some cases, they may conflict with strongly held cultural values, beliefs, or restrictions. We provide access to these materials to preserve the historical record, but we do not endorse the attitudes, prejudices, or behaviors [found within them](#). (University of South Florida Libraries, 2025, para. 2)

This change confirms a claim of 2025 when it was reported that “USF is deleting some of the university’s webpages, news articles, PDF documents and internal audits with content on [diversity, equity and inclusion](#)” (Garcia, 2025, para.1). Deletions include anti-racism documents and discussions on structural racism. According to the reporting, this was being done “at the direction of the USF upper administration, who was responding to demands by the Board of Governors and “their interpretation” of [Senate Bill 266](#)” (Garcia, 2025, para.10). USF leaders, including President Rhea Law, have stated that the university will remain diverse despite phasing out [the DEI office](#) (Bowman, 2024).

The recent compliance is not surprising, given that USF is currently under investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights for its McKnight Doctoral Fellowship Program, which has race-based [eligibility criteria](#) (Diversity.com, 2025).

Florida State University - Leadership Stability

Interestingly, FSU appears to have experienced the least visible disruption among the four universities in terms of library leadership and operations. The university recently celebrated the retirement of longtime Dean of University Libraries Gale Etschmaier, who led significant modernization efforts since 2018 and successfully navigated challenges including pandemic transitions and emergency facility issues. Katie McCormick has been appointed as interim dean, suggesting continuity in library leadership during this [transitional period](#) (Lowery, 2025).

While Dean, Etschmaier developed a strategic plan for the library that included equitable access to information. Her plan explains:

Equitable access to information is critical to intellectual freedom and participation in a democratic society. Through thoughtful stewardship, preservation, and the promotion of diverse perspectives and voices, FSU Libraries will reduce barriers to information in [all of its forms](#). (Florida State University Libraries, 2023, n.d.)

It is unclear as to the extent to which the diverse perspectives Dean Etschmaier had planned for will be available at FSU libraries, now that she has retired, and DEI regulations are increasingly being enforced. The library’s explanation of its book removal practices suggests there will be deaccession of DEI material.

Librarians strive to maintain collections that represent a wide range of topics, ideas, and authorial perspectives. At the same time, we acknowledge that collection development strategies and cataloging practices within academic research institutions have long excluded and diminished the discoverability of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color voices and scholars. Thoughtful deaccessioning or relocation of materials with racist, sexist, or ethnocentric biases may be used not to censor outdated or offensive perspectives, but to make room for more representative and current materials and create the balance of resources that will be most relevant and useful to the [libraries' constituents](#). (Florida State University Libraries, 2023b, para.12)

On close examination there are additional subtle signs that FSU's academic library is complying with the demands of SB266 by removing DEI references from its website. A search for the terms 'diversity, equity, and inclusion' at FSU libraries often results in a "oops, that page can't be found." As late as 2024, for instance, the "[LibGuides: FSU Standards & Evolving Practice](#)" website of the FSU Libraries included a statement about Inclusive Language followed by the subtopics, "Building Equity & Inclusion Through the Power of Language" and "[Bias-Free Language](#) (APA Style Guide)," with links to those sources. The APA material is there but in 2025 clicking on the link to the first subtopic results in an "[oops](#)" response. This same page includes a statement on "Diversity in Resources, Diversity in Perspectives" that describes how marginalized voices are included in the library collection. The subtopic here is "FSU Libraries Collection Development Values Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." It's not surprising that clicking on that hyperlinked topic yields this response: "Page not found. Oops! The page you are trying to access [does not exist](#)," It would have taken the user to material from the Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs, and it is unclear what would have been provided there for the user. (Florida State University Libraries, 2023a)

The student newspaper has published several articles about student protests over the various DEI restrictions, but any changes in library services, access to resources, etc. are not mentioned although these are evident. As one student reported noted, "If students, faculty and alumni don't push back against these changes, Florida's higher education system may [soon be unrecognizable](#)" (Perez, 2025, para. 4).

Conclusion

The effects of DEI legislation are felt in all aspects of Florida's public universities, including their academic libraries. From this analysis of recent changes at four of Florida's public university academic libraries, we can draw several conclusions.

- Academic libraries have historically served as neutral spaces for intellectual exploration. Their transformation into contested political terrain represents a fundamental shift in how higher education operates and highlights another

example of how the intent of America's democratic institutions is being threatened.

- Fear of investigation affects not just what professors teach, but how library-faculty collaboration occurs around research support. There is a systematic effort to restrict not just what can be taught, but what librarians can collect, how they can serve diverse populations, and whether they can participate in professional development around inclusive practices. This environment has a chilling effect on academic freedom and ultimately stunts our growth as we pursue creative solutions to pressing problems.
- While Florida's academic libraries have maintained basic operations, they've lost specialized capacity for inclusive practices precisely when demographic changes in higher education make such expertise most valuable. This represents both an immediate loss for Florida students and a concerning precedent for academic freedom nationwide.
- Pending litigation overshadows academic pursuits at Florida's university libraries as librarians face legal uncertainty regarding diversity and inclusion practices. In January 2025, the ACLU filed a lawsuit against SB 266, claiming it restricts academic freedom and infringes on First Amendment rights. Professors from UF, FSU, and FIU are [plaintiffs in this case](#) (ACLU of Florida, 2025). As of this writing, the case is in judicial process and the legal landscape remains unsettled.

Recommendations

Florida serves as a testing ground for broader restrictions on higher education and academic libraries throughout the United States. The *Library Science and Culture: Exploring the Art and Science of Libraries* blog discusses the role of librarians in defending academic freedom, arguing

Libraries, as the guardians of Knowledge and historical truth, play a pivotal role in resisting these efforts. When governments or political groups attempt to control the narrative, librarians are not just the first line of defense but the [frontline warriors](#). (Library Science and Culture Blog, 2025, para.5)

The blog offers multiple recommendations for fulfilling this critical role that involve Defending Accurate and Inclusive Histories, Protecting Research and Academic Inquiry, and Upholding the Principles of Intellectual Freedom; namely, librarians are encouraged to:

- Curate and preserve diverse, accurate historical accounts.
- Promote access to banned or challenged books in digital and physical collections.
- Support faculty and students who seek to challenge revisionist narratives.
- Advocate for open-access publishing to ensure research remains publicly available.
- Fight funding cuts by supporting scholarly communities in raising awareness.
- Defend academic independence against political interference.

- Resist pressure to censor collections based on political ideology.
 - Educate communities about the dangers of suppressing diverse perspectives.
 - Actively engage in discussions on academic freedom at their institutions.
- ([Library Science and Culture Blog](#), 2025, paras.6-8)

Florida's public university libraries have not received as much press attention as the issues of faculty and governance under the weight of DEI restrictions. Yet, their critical role in advancing scholarship and academic freedom must be acknowledged along with the immeasurable harm being imposed on them and all they offer to the university community that has resulted from the recent anti-DEI legislation and regulations.

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Closing Thoughts

State leaders have been touting the #1 ranking of Florida in higher education by [U.S. News & World Report](#) in 2025 (Best colleges, 2025). While two of the rankings criteria rely on important considerations--Florida's low tuition and fees and high graduation rates—the rankings are widely acknowledged to fall short of being accurate measures of educational quality (Barari et al., 2024; Dermeier, 2023). Our research shows that on the main factors that contribute to educational quality, Florida's universities are in peril.

Across our papers, we have looked at the main elements of educational quality listed below. These are arrayed in the following table, contrasted with our findings:

Indicator of Quality	Our Findings
Professional faculty members are empowered to make the best educational decisions on the content and methods of their teaching	Government officials consider faculty to be state workers and are making decisions on curriculum that are not informed by disciplinary standards.
Research is based on open inquiry and usefulness to society	Grants and research activity on certain topics have been curtailed by legislation, and many productive researchers have left Florida for other states.
Governance is conducted by those closest to the system	Political interference in searches, mandated post-tenure review, and decisions on general education have been made with little or no faculty input.
Information is accessed through great academic libraries	Exodus of important librarians and reductions in funding have jeopardized library collections and services.
Environments foster student and faculty interaction and student success	Fear, low morale, and an environment of surveillance have affected relationships between faculty and students. Supports for insuring inclusion of all students in campus life have been compromised.
Accreditation system involves peer judgment in assessing whether educational quality is present.	Establishment of an alternate collegiate accreditation system by political actors may lead to standards and decisions contrary to academic peer judgment.

Ensuring quality means more than scoring high on ratings. Our summary recommendations focus on practices that have fostered thriving universities in the past and are important for the successful future of Florida's universities.

Many recommendations center on academic freedom, the crucial foundation of great modern universities. Academic freedom does not mean unrestricted and totally unregulated action: it requires that oversight of academic work be the professional responsibility of peers in the profession, the people who are most knowledgeable about the nature of the work and standards of excellence. To regulate faculty work and advancement, disciplinary associations, accrediting agencies, and university governance bodies have established special, rigorous principles of peer review based on ethics and accepted methods of practice. These ensure high quality outcomes for research, scholarship and teaching. Academic freedom must be preserved in curricular decision making, research activity, and shared governance as they affect students, staff, faculty, and administrators in our universities. For this to happen:

1. Shared governance must continue to serve as the underlying mechanism for university operations. The collaborative judgments of administrators, faculty, and Boards of Trustees must be the source of decisions on faculty advancement, student enrollment, presidential searches, and other essential matters. These judgments must not be overridden by outside interference;
2. Decisions about what courses are appropriate in the general core curriculum for teaching principles of disciplinary research and foundational content must be based on faculty expertise and made by faculty through their governance systems. Government and political interference have no place in dictating what concepts can be taught;
3. Faculty must be allowed to choose research topics that they and their colleagues have judged to be important as disciplinary and societal contributions. Outside efforts to restrict topics or to control methods and funding thwart the goals of knowledge advancement;
4. Students must have access to a wide range of fields of study, including courses in liberal arts and sciences as well as professional areas and they must be exposed to multiple perspectives on critical issues; and
5. The expertise of university library faculty must be respected in acquiring, circulating, and preserving information sources.

We also offer evidence that campus climate must be factored into considerations of university quality. The entire campus community must feel safe and that their voices are heard and respected. For this to happen:

1. Students must be kept aware of enacted and potential policy changes affecting them and given a voice in expressing opinions about these policies;
2. Mental health and the sense of belonging that are essential to good functioning must be supported across all members of the university community.

The desire of Florida's Governor and Board of Governors to have its public universities ranked #1 in the country will require serious review and makeover of those policies that currently foster a narrowly defined curriculum, restricted research agenda and a university community consumed by fear and concern for retaliation.

The League of Women Voters of Florida and the American Association of University Women will continue to monitor the state's higher education policies for the opportunities they afford students to be exposed to and to critically examine diverse perspectives on wide-ranging topics such that they can effectively engage with faculty in civic discussions and democratic practices.

References

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