

A harbinger of things to come in the US? Academic Freedom in Florida since 2019

LOUISE K. DAVIDSON-SCHMICH¹

In 2019 Republican Ron DeSantis became governor of the state of Florida and the Republican Party achieved an absolute majority in both houses of the state legislature; a majority of state Supreme Court Justices have also been appointed by Republicans. As a result, the party has been able to freely implement its anti-democratic, anti-feminist, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-critical race theory educational agenda over the past six years. Below are examples of government restrictions placed on Florida public schools, educators, and the twelve institutions in the State University System of Florida over the past several years. Similar policies have begun to be attempted by the Trump administration, applying to all states, and to private as well as public institutions.

Schools

The Florida Parental Rights in Education Act (colloquially called the “Don’t Say Gay” Bill) prohibits public schools from teaching about sexual orientation and gender identity between kindergarten and 8th grade, and only in a manner consistent with state standards from 9th to 12th grades (National Education Association 2024). State standards specify sex as a binary, immutable characteristic and the importance of abstinence rather than contraception. This law also requires school districts to allow parents to easily challenge any school library book they believe to include ‘inappropriate’ topics. Over 4,500 books were removed from Florida schools in 2024 (WUSF 2024). A regulation banning teachers or students from being addressed by pronouns that do not correspond to their sex assigned at birth has been put on hold due to a lawsuit. Large school districts like Miami’s have stopped celebrating LGBTQ+ History Month.

Universities

The DeSantis administration has taken many actions against Florida’s public universities as well. A 2023 state law dictated that courses used to fulfill core general education requirements may not “include a curriculum that teaches identity politics, (...) or is based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States” (Florida Statutes 2024 §1007.25(3)(c)). In the U.S. liberal arts-based system, students are required to fulfill general education requirements which consist of a range of classes outside their major field of study. In the past, students have used Women’s Studies courses to fulfill these requirements. Now universities such as the University of Florida (UF) have removed Women’s Studies classes from the list of approved courses (Thomas/

Shanley 2025). Overall, at UF, 75% of the former core curriculum courses have been removed, including all foreign language offerings, all African American Studies and all environmental engineering classes. These courses may still be offered and taken by students majoring in the relevant area, or by students pursuing an elective, but the number of people who do so in practice is likely to be quite small, providing an additional rationale for cutting faculty and courses in these areas. In 2025, faculty members from three Florida universities filed a lawsuit against this legislation, arguing it infringes on free speech (Soule, n.d.).

In 2023, Florida adopted a policy that prohibited state universities from spending taxpayer money on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, defined as “any *program, campus activity, or policy* that classifies individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, gender identity, or sexual orientation and promotes differential or preferential treatment of individuals on the basis of such classification” (Alonso 2023, emphasis added by authors). In 2024, UF terminated a dozen staff members employed in DEI efforts and universities across the state closed centers and programs designed to help traditionally underrepresented students (Alonso 2023). In other cases, these efforts continued but were renamed or restructured. For example, Florida International University’s (FIU) Office of Social Justice and Inclusion, home to the university’s Pride Center and Women’s Center, was moved to its Centers for Student Engagement and continues its work under a new rubric.²

In February 2025, the Trump administration enacted a similar DEI ban for all US-based universities that receive federal funding – virtually all institutions of higher education. Moreover, Trump stated that employees have an obligation to report colleagues who “disguise these programs by using coded or imprecise language” (Green/Aleaziz 2025), warning that anyone not denouncing colleagues may face “adverse consequences” (ibid.). It therefore seems likely that efforts to shield DEI efforts may be short-lived, in Florida and elsewhere.

Since 2021 Florida has been attempting to root out evidence of “woke indoctrination” (Brensell/Friedman 2024) at its public universities through an annual “view-point diversity” (ibid.) survey asking students and staff questions designed to elicit responses demonstrating a lack of intellectual freedom for conservative students. Response rates to these voluntary surveys have hovered in the 2 % range, however. The DeSantis administration has also sought to shape public universities by appointing politicized leadership. In 2025 alone two universities – FIU and Florida Atlantic – have seen their presidents replaced, over the will of faculty and students, by Republican legislators with no academic experience (Schultz 2025). The most egregious case of such takeover occurred at the New College, Florida’s public small liberal arts college (Mazzei 2023). The New College was known for its progressive nature. In January 2023, the Governor replaced a majority of the College’s Board of Trustees with political appointees, including Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist and admirer of Orban’s Hungary (Rufo 2023). The trustees promptly fired the New College President Patricia Okker and replaced her with a Republican politi-

cian. The College then discontinued its Gender Studies major and closed its diversity office. They began modelling the college on Hillsdale College, a fundamentalist Christian college in Michigan. The new leadership created a baseball team to bring more men to what they perceived as a too feminine campus, giving them choice dormitory rooms and forcing incumbent New College students off campus. In fall 2024 the College shuttered the student-run Gender and Diversity Center – a gathering space for students – and threw all the Center’s books (purchased by largely by students, not by state funds) into a dumpster. When images of books in the garbage went viral, Trustee Rufo tweeted, “(w)e abolished the gender studies program. Now we’re throwing out the trash” (Friedman 2024).

Labor Laws

Another 2023 Florida state law has made it more difficult for faculty to unite and resist such efforts. That year a law banned teachers’ and faculty unions from automatically collecting union dues from employee paychecks; instead, faculty would have to actively opt in to have dues paid – and 60% of all union members would have to do so or the union would be decertified. As a result, some faculty unions have indeed been decertified. This law is currently being challenged in court. Moreover, tenure protections have been severely eroded. Florida law requires faculty members to undergo a post-tenure review every five years to check whether they, among other things, are “in compliance with state laws” (Atterbury 2024 such as the ones above. The first round of reviews resulted in the immediate firing of ten tenured faculty members and over 50 others being put on probation (ibid.).

Conclusion

The above laws have primarily impacted Florida’s public schools and universities; DeSantis has had little leverage over private institutions such as the University of Miami, Rollins College, or the University of Tampa, because the state does not fund much of their activity. The trends in Washington now place these institutions – as well as all others in the United States – under threat, as virtually all U.S.-based colleges and universities receive federal funding. Events since January 2025 make clear that Florida is a harbinger of things to come nationally and for all institutions of higher education. Coordinated resistance on the part of all stakeholders is increasingly necessary as attempts to date to ignore, or circumvent, the Republicans’ anti-feminist agenda have not been enough to slow its spread.

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Anmerkungen

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- 2 Cf. Internet: <https://dasa.fiu.edu/all-departments/social-justice-inclusion/> [24.2.2025].