



From 'Free Shoes University' To 'Free Speech University'

William Mattox

Still heartsick over an utterly disappointing 2025 football season, fans of Florida State University got some good news recently: FSU now ranks #3 in the nation – in a category that's actually more important than football.

According to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), FSU's record in "protecting free speech and

academic freedom" now exceeds that of almost every other college in the country. Only the University of Virginia and Michigan Tech rank higher.

Apparently, the school that Steve Spurrier once called "Free Shoes University" (for violating NCAA compensation rules) should now be considered "Free Speech University."

Former FSU President J. Stanley Marshall would be proud.

Marshall presided over a period of campus unrest during the 1960s when FSU came to be known as “the Berkeley of the South.” His leadership in helping people on all sides appreciate the importance of free speech is commemorated today with a memorial wall on the FSU campus.

Moreover, the think tank Marshall founded in his post-FSU years – The James Madison Institute – continues his work of promoting campus free speech throughout our state.

Indeed, JMI recently commissioned a poll of Florida residents which asked, among other things, whether Floridians believe our colleges and universities are doing a better job of promoting “intellectual diversity and free thought” than schools in other states.

The survey results were, in a word, mixed.

Twenty-eight percent said Florida universities are doing a better job, 23 percent said worse, and the rest said either “about the same” (33 percent) or “not sure” (16 percent).

What should we make of these poll results, especially in view of FSU’s #3 ranking?

For starters, Florida leaders need to do a better job of touting the successes of our university system in promoting free expression and viewpoint diversity. After all:

- In addition to FSU’s #3 ranking, the University of South Florida (#17) and Florida International University (#35) placed among FIRE’s highest-ranked schools;

- Like the three schools mentioned above, both the University of Florida and the University of North Florida currently hold a “green light” rating (FIRE’s highest) for their official policies regarding campus speech; and
- Florida was the first state – more than five years ago! – in which every public university president signed a joint statement affirming the Sunshine State’s commitment to campus free expression.

So, there’s a lot for Florida education leaders to crow about.

At the same time, some of our state universities clearly need to do a better job of living up to their stated commitment to free speech. Specifically, the University of Central Florida placed in the bottom third of FIRE’s rankings – #183 out of 251 – and five other Sunshine State universities (Florida A & M, Florida Atlantic, New College, West Florida, and Florida Gulf Coast) merely hold a middling “yellow light” rating from FIRE.

One way Florida policymakers could help our state schools “raise their game” would be to tie future “performance funding” (the bonuses universities earn for meeting certain metrics) to the results of the Florida Board of Governors’ annual campus-specific surveys. These surveys are designed to assess how well our state schools are cultivating a climate that fosters free expression and constructive dialogue. And they are an important complement to FIRE’s data (especially for smaller institutions, where FIRE’s metrics are not very broad).

Sadly, in recent years, Florida's Faculty Union has sought to sabotage these anonymous surveys, fearful of what the results might show. They've encouraged students and instructors to refuse to participate in state assessments of campus culture.

If eligibility for future performance funding were to become conditional upon a university generating a useful percentage of completed surveys, there's reason to believe future boycotts would fail. And that Floridians would gain much more data to assess just how well our state universities (especially our smaller schools) are doing.

While policymakers ponder this performance funding proposal, all Floridians ought to celebrate FSU's #3 position in FIRE's latest rankings. No, it won't take all the sting out of a terribly disappointing football season. But Free Speech University has a much better ring to it than Free Shoes University.

Congrats, FSU.

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