

Improving Campus Culture

Florida Higher
Ed is Facing
Challenges



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Author Stephen King caused quite a stir last July when he tweeted, “DeSantis signs bill requiring Florida students, professors to register political views with state. I. Can’t. Even.”¹

Within a short period of time, the Twitter post received more than 25,000 shares and 135,000 likes from followers of the “King of Horror.” In fact, King’s tweet generated so much buzz that a bevy of “fact-checkers” from Snopes, PolitiFact, VerifyThis, and the Associated Press went scrambling to find supporting evidence for King’s claim.²

They found none.

Indeed, what everyone caught up in the Twitter fright-frenzy seemed to forget was that Stephen King’s forte isn’t just horror. It’s fiction.

And like many recent national media reports about Florida education, King's tweet did not square with the facts.

All of the various fact-checking services declared King's tweet "false."³ And all traced King's (unintentionally) fictional post to a 2021 Salon article that had advanced this same narrative. Curiously, Salon's editors altered the headline to their story – 13 months after it had originally run! – once the fact-checkers exposed their folly.⁴

In the end, King issued a mea culpa. "I regret having posted the headline without being more confident the story was correct," King's statement read. "Salon is usually more reliable. Twitter is a constant learning experience, and I will try to do better."⁵

The lesson here isn't just that all of us should be careful on Twitter – it's that all of us should be especially alert to misinformation about what is happening in Florida education. Because there's a lot of "horror fiction" going around these days. And much of this misinformation appears to be a hyperbolic reaction to Florida leaders' legitimate attempts to address some very serious problems in education – problems too often ignored by political and academic leaders in other parts of the country.

Scholars Against Research?

The Salon story that spurred the King scare-storm stemmed from a 2021 piece of legislation, signed into law by DeSantis, that requires the state university system to conduct an "objective, nonpartisan, and statistically valid" annual survey to help assess "intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity" at Florida schools. Specifically, the survey is to measure the "extent to which competing ideas and perspectives are presented" and how much "students, faculty, and staff feel free to express their beliefs and viewpoints on campus and in the classroom."⁶

If all this sounds fairly benign, it should.

Concerns about campus free expression and viewpoint diversity have been growing in recent years. And these concerns have spurred national surveys – by scholarly organizations such as the Heterodox Academy and the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) – to objectively measure the prevalence of student and faculty "self-censorship," among other things.⁷

In addition to these national surveys, in-depth campus-specific studies also have arisen. For example, during the Florida Legislature's consideration of the 2021 legislation, Senate sponsor Ray Rodrigues called attention to a model campus survey project conducted by an ideologically-diverse team of scholars at the Univer-

sity of North Carolina.⁸

Against this backdrop, one would think that "objective, nonpartisan, and statistically valid" data collection would be embraced by scholars at Florida's major research universities. Especially since free expression and viewpoint diversity are so central to the mission of higher education – pursuing truth.

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Nevertheless, from the start, the United Faculty of Florida objected to this research project. They claimed the (anonymous and voluntary) surveys were intended to send "a clear message that those that proliferate views with which the governor disagrees will find their funding in jeopardy."⁹ Accordingly, the faculty union sought to thwart the new research at every turn.

First, the United Faculty fought the 2021 legislation. After losing that battle, a group of professors then tried (and failed) to convince U.S. District Judge Mark Walker to prevent the survey from going forward.

All the while, the faculty union continuously cast aspersions upon the research project, working with sympathetic media "reporters" (like the team at Salon). Ultimately, the United Faculty sought to sabotage the research by urging students and faculty to refuse to participate in the survey.

The sad part about the United Faculty's sophomoric response to this survey project is that a strong set of data on free expression and viewpoint diversity from Florida schools would probably reveal two things: (1) Florida's state universities have some "campus culture" problems that need to be addressed; (2) Florida's problems pale in comparison to those in other states.

Now, there's no guarantee that this would be the outcome of a high-quality survey conducted under good research conditions (that is, without an organized campaign to sabotage the results). But this is a reasonable hypothesis, given that Florida's state university populations bear at least some resemblance to the overall ideological diversity of our state – and given that addressing campus culture issues has been a major priority of Florida's higher education leadership in recent years.

Indeed, the Florida campus survey project represented the latest in a long line of initiatives to improve free expression and viewpoint diversity in our state. Those efforts began in 2013 with a 67-page comprehensive report on the state of Florida's higher education system, published by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) in conjunction with the James Madison Institute (JMI).¹⁰

Entitled *Florida Rising*, this 2013 ACTA report gave the Sunshine State's university system high marks in a number of key areas (affordability, core curriculum, governance, etc.) but identified

viewpoint diversity as an area of particular weakness.

Given this, JMI followed up that 2013 study with two subsequent reports – in 2017 and 2020 – that focused specifically on Florida’s efforts to address campus free expression and intellectual diversity issues. (This 2023 publication, represents the latest in JMI’s ongoing series of higher ed reports.)

Both the 2017 and 2020 studies had much good news to report. In the 2017 report, JMI highlighted the University of Florida’s rapid rise – from being listed on FIRE’s “Worst 10 Schools for Free Speech” nationally to becoming the Sunshine State’s first university to reach “green light” status (FIRE’s highest rating) for campus speech policies.¹¹ Similarly, JMI’s 2020 study reported on a similar FIRE rating ascension at Florida State University – and on a successful legislative initiative to eliminate oxymoronically-named “free speech zones” at Florida universities.¹²

JMI’s 2020 study also hailed The Florida Statement on Free Expression, a groundbreaking 2019 declaration signed by all 12 state university presidents and then-Chancellor Marshall Criser. This official statement, the first of its kind issued by an entire state’s university system, catapulted Florida into a position of national leadership on campus free speech issues – at a time when Sunshine State schools were climbing the ladder of other prestige college rankings. (Both of Florida’s flagship universities – UF and FSU – are now ranked in U.S. News and World Report’s Top 20 Public Universities; and Florida’s university system now enjoys U.S. News’ overall #1 ranking.¹³)

So, heading into Florida’s initial round of campus surveys in 2022, there was reason to believe a reliable study of free expression and viewpoint diversity at Florida’s universities would generate results similar to those found in a somewhat-related 2021 research report entitled, “Diversity University: DEI Bloat in the Academy.” That national study, which looked at the prevalence of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” personnel at 65 major universities, found: (1) Florida’s flagship institutions suffer from DEI bloat; and (2) the Sunshine State’s DEI problems pale in comparison to those at most major universities around the country.¹⁴

Undermining their Credibility

Last spring, Florida universities distributed two variations of the 2022 Florida campus survey – one for students and one for faculty and staff – via the web-based platform SurveyMonkey.

An email accompanying the survey “made clear it was anonymous and voluntary, according to communications reviewed by The Associated Press.” The email stated: “Your participation in

this survey is completely voluntary. You are free to not answer any question or withdraw from the survey at any time. All responses are anonymous.”¹⁵

Nevertheless, the United Faculty union encouraged a boycott of the survey, claiming faculty members might be identified and targeted based on their responses.

■ The faculty union's sophomoric behavior is undermining their credibility, fueling suspicions that their objections to the survey have less to do with legitimate concerns (such as respondent anonymity) and more to do with fears of what good data would show.

Statewide, a total of roughly 9,000 students and 9,000 faculty and staff completed the 2022 survey. This represented an overall response rate of 2.4 percent for students and 9.4 percent for faculty and staff. Tenured faculty and instructors made up nearly one-third of the employees’ sample; administrators and staff comprised the rest.¹⁶

Campus-to-campus participation proved uneven, as some schools found student response rates depressed by bad timing (the end-of-semester flurry of activity). For example, only 53 Florida A & M students and 413 Florida International University stu-

dents completed the survey. (This is less than 1 percent of each school’s student population). United Faculty president Andrew Gothard seized upon these low numbers to try and discredit the entire project, calling it “nothing of value.”¹⁷

“The low participation shows that this narrative that Gov. DeSantis and his supporters are pushing — indoctrination in higher education — is entirely fabricated,” Gothard said. “If students and the community were actually genuinely concerned that this was happening, no amount of encouragement to boycott from us would have stopped them.”¹⁸

Perhaps. But it’s also true that if students were being successfully indoctrinated, they would have had little reason to defy the union’s boycott and sound an alarm.

Moreover, the faculty union’s ongoing resistance to the survey project begs several questions:

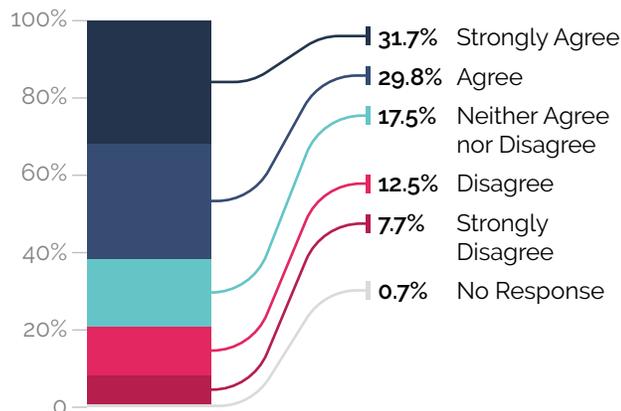
Why is United Faculty behaving more like partisan activists than like reasoned scholars? Don’t they know that researchers from across the ideological spectrum have seen the wisdom of collecting data on free expression and viewpoint diversity? And don’t they worry that their sophomoric behavior is undermining their credibility, fueling suspicions that their objections to the survey have less to do with legitimate concerns (such as respondent anonymity) and more to do with fears of what good data would show?

Initial Results

It is difficult to know how much, if any, the faculty union’s boycott skewed the Florida higher education survey results. Since this represented the first year of the project, there is no way to com-

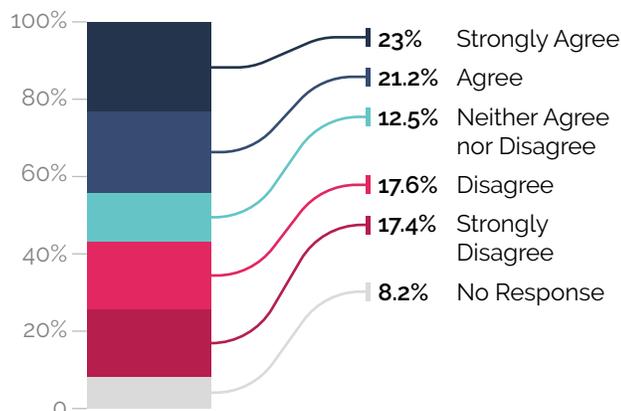
Fostering Free Expression?

Q. My college or university campus provides an environment for free expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs.



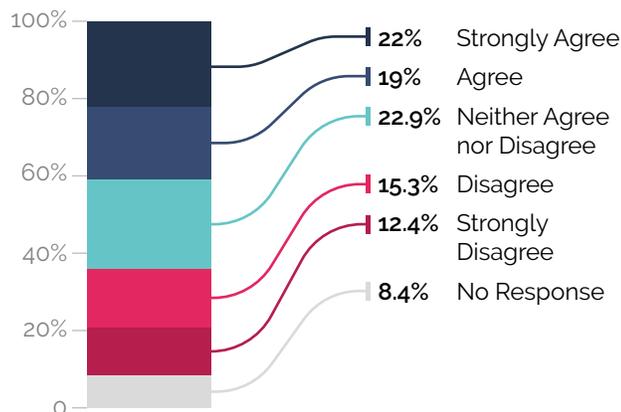
Addressing Controversial Topics?

Q. I feel comfortable speaking up and giving my views on controversial topics.



Promoting Viewpoint Diversity?

Q. My college or university is doing a good job when it comes to promoting or encouraging diverse political viewpoints.



pare 2022 numbers to previous-year results. And since the Florida survey contained a unique question set, it is difficult to make apples-to-apples comparisons between Florida results and those found in other studies.

Moreover, given the response rate problems previously referenced, it would be a mistake to put too much stock in the campus-specific data from the 2022 student survey.

Still, the combined Florida student numbers compare well with other data sets of college survey data. For example, the 2022 Campus Pulse data for FIRE measured nearly 45,000 students at 208 schools around the country, while Florida's 2022 survey measured nearly 9,000 students at 12 state universities.¹⁹

Thus, even though there are some limitations to the data (as is often the case in year one of any study) and even though one must be even more cautious than usual in interpreting the data (thanks to the unknown impact of the faculty union's boycott), there are still roughly 9,000 student responses and 9,000 faculty and staff responses worth considering.

What do these surveys show? Here are some highlights from the student survey:

Free expression. When asked if their "college or university campus provides an environment for free expression of ideas, opinions, and beliefs," 61% of Florida students either agreed (30%) or strongly agreed (31%) that it does. By contrast, only 21% either disagreed (13%) or strongly disagreed (8%).

Viewpoint diversity. When asked if their "college or university is doing a good job when it comes to promoting or encouraging diverse political viewpoints," a total of 41% of Florida students agreed, 28% disagreed, and 23% gave a neutral response. The rest (8%) did not provide an answer.

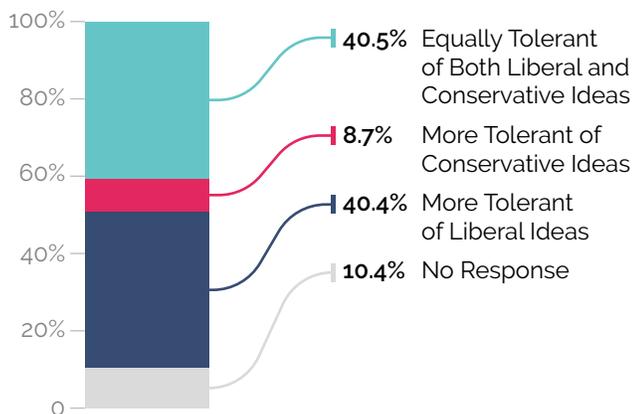
Campus culture. When asked to assess the ideological bent of their university, 41% of Florida students said "equally tolerant of both liberal and conservative ideas and beliefs," 40% said "more tolerant of liberal ideas and beliefs," and 9% said "more tolerant of conservative ideas and beliefs." (Roughly 10% of participants did not respond to this question.)

Ideological bias. When asked if their "professors or course instructors use class time to express their own social or political beliefs without objectively discussing opposing social or political beliefs," just over half the students (51%) either disagreed (23%) or strongly disagreed (28%). Conversely, 26% of all students agreed (16%) or strongly agreed (10%) that their classroom instruction was skewed. (The remainder offered a neutral response.) Of those who said classroom instruction was skewed, 76% of students said it tilted in a liberal direction, 9% said it tilted in a conservative direction, and the rest said "other" or gave no response.

Controversial speech. When asked if they "feel comfortable speaking up and giving my views on controversial topics," 44%

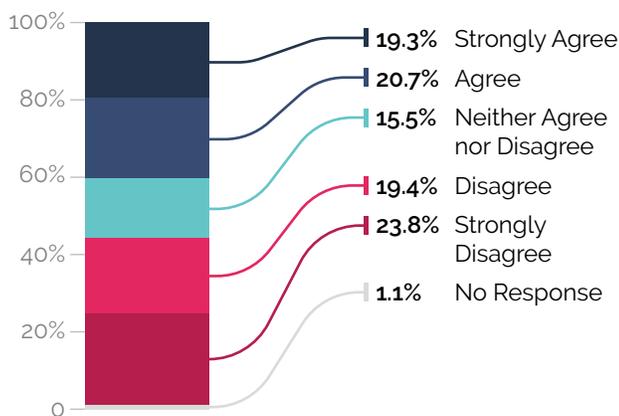
Tolerance for Ideas?

Q. My college or university is generally ...



Intimidated by Colleagues?

Q. I have felt intimidated to share my ideas or political opinions because they were different from those of my colleagues.



of Florida students said they do, 35% said they don't, and the rest offered a neutral or non-response. The group expressing unease about addressing controversial topics was roughly three times as large as the group (12%) expressing unease about speaking up on non-controversial topics.

Here are several highlights from the faculty and staff survey:

Political intimidation. When asked if they “have felt intimidated to share my ideas or political opinions because they were different from those of my colleagues,” 40% of all faculty and staff either agreed (21%) or strongly agreed (19%) with that statement. A total of 43% either disagreed (19%) or strongly disagreed (24%). The rest offered a neutral response.

Campus culture. When asked to assess the ideological bent

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of their university, 46% of all Florida faculty and staff said their campus was “equally tolerant and welcoming of both liberal and conservative ideas and beliefs,” but 33% disagreed with this statement. Among employees who disagreed, those who perceived the dominant viewpoint on campus was liberal outnumbered those who perceived the dominant viewpoint was conservative by a ratio of 3 to 1.

Ideological bias. Much like the campus culture data, the faculty survey found that when instructors perceived an ideological bias in whether tenure would be granted – or in what research projects and dissertation topics would be encouraged – those saying the tilt was in a liberal direction outnumbered those saying the tilt was in a conservative direction by a ratio of 3 to 1.

Other Measures (and Promising Developments)

Florida's first annual survey of campus culture is an important development in the Sunshine State's ongoing effort to foster free expression and viewpoint diversity. These survey results complement other objective measures of campus free speech, such as FIRE's ratings of each school's official policies surrounding speech.

As the accompanying table shows, the most notable change in FIRE ratings among Florida universities (since JMI's 2020 report) is the ascension of the University of South Florida to green light status.²⁰ This gives Florida four “green light” schools – and ought to serve as an impetus for the other state universities to join them.

Indeed, given that FIRE ratings for speech policies are fully within the control of university administrators, Florida policymakers should seriously consider withholding future “bonus” performance funding from any institution that fails to have a “green light” rating from FIRE. There's really no excuse for any state uni-

versity to have a rating lower than green, especially now that it has been four years since every university president signed The Florida Statement on Free Expression.

In addition to providing ratings for official speech policies, FIRE has begun ranking major universities for campus free speech, using a comprehensive 10-category matrix. Six of these categories deal with student perceptions drawn from survey data collected by College

Pulse and FIRE, including “comfort expressing ideas,” “tolerance for liberal speakers,” and “tolerance for conservative speakers.” The remaining four categories assess administrative actions, including FIRE's ratings of official speech policies.²¹

In FIRE's 2023 national rankings of 203 schools, FSU comes in at #15, FIU at #28, and USF at #71. (See accompanying table.) Increasingly, these comprehensive FIRE rankings will be important

FIRE Ratings

Of Official Speech Policies

SCHOOL	2013	2017	2020	2023
University of Florida	●	●	●	●
Florida State University	●	●	●	●
University of North Florida	●	●	●	●
University of South Florida	●	●	●	●
Florida A&M University	●	●	●	●
Florida Atlantic University	●	●	●	●
Florida Gulf Coast University	●	●	●	●
Florida International University	●	●	●	●
New College of Florida	●	●	●	●
University of Central Florida	●	●	●	●
University of West Florida	●	●	●	●

Note: Florida Polytechnic University has never been rated by FIRE.

for Florida universities to monitor, for they are designed to assess far more than the ratings of official speech policies FIRE has long provided.

While Florida’s Board of Governors are working to improve the overall campus climate at our state universities – most notably with a new “civil discourse” initiative – attention is also being given to ways that Florida’s entire post-secondary system can eliminate instructional teachings about race that directly or indirectly violate our nation’s civil rights laws.

In February, the presidents of all 28 Florida state colleges issued a statement pledging to put an end to all Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs and policies that promote racial discrimination. In their statement, the college presidents acknowledged that DEI initiatives were adopted with the hope that they would “increase diversity of thought” and “promote the open access mission of our state college system.” But they said DEI programs “have come to mean and accomplish the very opposite” because they often seek “to push ideologies such as critical race theory and its related tenets.”²²

The presidents’ statement went on to say that if critical race theory is part of a postsecondary curriculum, it must be presented among other viewpoints – and that no program, initiative, or academic requirement that “compels belief” in “intersectionality” is welcome on campus.²³

The Florida college presidents’ statement stands in marked

Comprehensive FIRE Rankings

Of 203 Universities Nationwide

- 15. Florida State University
- 28. Florida International University
- 71. University of South Florida
- 104. University of Florida
- 129. University of Miami
- 177. University of Central Florida

contrast to a 2022 proclamation by the Board of Governors for California Community Colleges. It decreed that every employee – faculty, staff, and administrators – much be evaluated for their competencies in “diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.” Among California’s list of recommended competencies were creating a curriculum that “promotes a race conscious and intersectional lens” and advocating for “anti-racist goals and initiatives.”²⁴

The Florida college presidents’ statement dovetails with a new legislative initiative aimed at de-funding DEI programs at state universities and outlawing “diversity statement” requirements for faculty positions.²⁵ Much of the impetus for this legislation comes from investigative reports of several Florida universities showing

Regaining Lost Ground in Academia

BY BRAD LITTLEJOHN

When Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis announced that he was replacing half the board of trustees of Florida's state honors college, New College of Florida, with staunch conservatives, it seemed a radical move. But why?

For much of human history, education has been an essentially conservative enterprise: the task of summing up the collected wisdom of the ages and handing it on to the next generation, so that they too might know how to live well within the world by walking old paths.

How strange it is, then, that for the past couple generations in America, education at nearly every level has become a radical progressive enterprise, dedicated to deconstruction and demolition of inherited norms, hallowed truths, and cherished beauties.

Gov. DeSantis, who has made a name for himself over the past year as perhaps the most popular and most successful conservative politician in the country, has been willing to take the offensive in an area where too many conservatives are content to play defense. The board overhaul at New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college with a progressive bent and outsized influence, is but the latest evidence of DeSantis's

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determination to pursue a positive conservative agenda.

Critics will protest that moves such as this represent an attempted ideological takeover of what is meant to be a neutral space for intellectual inquiry, and a threat to academic freedom. But such complaints ring hollow given progressives' own nakedly ideological approach to higher education and frequent campaigns to cancel and silence conservative scholars.

To be sure, we should not replace liberal indoctrination with conservative indoctrination; especially at the level of higher education, it is important for a free society to allow space for a robust debate between opposing ideas. However, given the extent of the progressive stranglehold over higher education these days, any effort to bring more conservative leadership into public universities is likely to promote rather than restrict viewpoint diversity. And if we really believe in the truths on which our nation was founded, we must not shy away from the great task of instilling them in the next generation.

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a “blizzard of programs, classes, trainings, reports, committees, certifications, events, documents, policies, clubs, groups, conferences, and statements” devoted to advancing racially-problematic ideas and practices.²⁶ These include the idea that “America is a force for white supremacy” and that students should “attend racially segregated counseling programs to address their ‘privilege’ and ‘oppression.’”²⁷

House Speaker Paul Renner says he wants the Legislature “to establish proper guardrails that ensure these institutions provide our students with an inclusive, well-rounded education that prepares them for the future without promoting an aggressively ideological agenda under the guise of diversity, equity and inclusion.”²⁸

Some academic leaders who share Renner's concerns about

■ The unserious attitude of the United Faculty towards Florida's new higher ed surveys does not inspire a great deal of confidence in faculty-led self-correction and self-policing.

DEI are wary of legislative action. “As professors, we have long been skeptical of conventional DEI initiatives,” write Amna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Synder. “We've argued that diversity training is ineffective, often counterproductive; that the push for more DEI administrators has swelled the ranks of unnecessary middle management; and that DEI offices have a pernicious predilection to undermine academic freedom.”²⁹

Nevertheless, Khalid and Snyder say “DEI needs to be reformed—and indeed transformed—from within the university itself, with faculty taking the lead.”³⁰

There is little question that the best remedy to current DEI problems would be for academic leaders to heed a variation of the famous line about physicians: Universities, heal thyself. But

the unserious attitude of the United Faculty towards Florida's new higher ed surveys does not inspire a great deal of confidence in faculty-led self-correction and self-policing. And absent a major movement within the academy to challenge the intransigence of the faculty union, the only recourse available to Florida citizens who care about free expression and viewpoint diversity will be to work through their elected officials and appointed boards that oversee higher education in our state.

Conclusion

When it comes to improving campus culture at state universities, those responsible for overseeing higher education in Florida are “facing challenges” in both senses of that phrase. They are being forced to deal with some new problems (like DEI) that have arisen in recent years; and they are stepping up to tackle these and other challenges despite considerable resistance from faculty union officials.

Indeed, in many ways, Florida's higher education policymakers appear to be following a pattern – that is now well-established in K-12 education – whereby reformers do not allow unreasonable (and self-interested) union opposition to get in the way of much-needed changes to improve student opportunities and outcomes.

In K-12 education, this courageous leadership has greatly benefitted Florida students. Over the last quarter-century Florida has gone from a Bottom 10 to a Top 5 state in most measures of K-12 student achievement. The Sunshine State is now widely viewed as a national leader in K-12 education. And more and more education-minded people are now moving to our state as a result.³¹

There is reason to believe that efforts to improve campus culture will produce similar benefits for Florida students – so long as policymakers stay the course and do not back down. What are some ways policymakers can do this? What does this mean in specific terms?

■ Florida's higher education policymakers appear to be following a pattern – that is now well-established in K-12 education – whereby reformers do not allow unreasonable (and self-interested) union opposition to get in the way of much-needed changes to improve student opportunities and outcomes.

It means that the Florida Board of Governors should continue to place a high priority on promoting free expression and viewpoint diversity, making improvements in the design and implementation of Florida's annual survey of campus culture, so that apples-to-apples comparisons can be made between our state universities and others elsewhere on important questions like student and faculty “self-censorship.”

It means that Florida policymakers should de-fund DEI and prohibit “diversity statements” as part of the hiring process for any university position. “We must ensure that our institutions of higher learning are focused on academic excellence and the pursuit of truth, not the imposition of trendy ideology,” Gov. DeSantis has said.³²

It means that Gov. DeSantis and the Florida Board of Governors should continue to place a high priority on appointing to key positions reform-minded leaders who have a strong commitment

to viewpoint diversity and academic excellence. The appointments in the last year have been extraordinary – Ray Rodrigues to Higher Education Chancellor, Ben Sasse to president of the University of Florida, Richard Corcoran and a bevy of new trustees to the leadership of New College. As the accompanying sidebar makes clear, these changes should help bring better balance – and better outcomes – to Florida's higher education system.

Finally, it means that when reasonable efforts to address legitimate concerns about Florida's public universities elicit hyperbolic responses in mainstream and social media, Florida policymakers should not be shaken. Because many of the stories being spread about Florida education these days are “horror fiction.”

William Mattox is the director of the Marshall Center for Educational Options at The James Madison Institute.

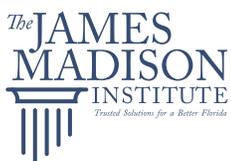


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