

“Where Woke Goes To Die”: Teaching Through Routine Crisis in Florida

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Abstract

To fight against “wokeness” in higher education, Florida’s conservative-led government passed multiple laws that restrict the ability of faculty to teach and students to learn at the state’s public colleges and universities. This legislation created a learning environment hostile to discussions of race, diversity, gender, and other “controversial” topics. In this article, I summarize some of the political challenges currently facing Florida’s faculty and argue that recent education policies have contributed to a sense of routine crisis among faculty. I discuss how this crisis, characterized by disorientation, distrust, and disillusion, negatively affects faculty morale and their ability to teach effectively.

Keywords

Academic freedom; crisis; education policy; Florida; higher education

Introduction

When I joined the faculty of the University of Central Florida in 2015, I was aware of the state government’s antipathy toward anthropology. Four years earlier, in the name of fiscal responsibility, then-governor of the U.S. state of Florida, Rick Scott, claimed that the state’s economy would be better served if the government financially supported the pursuit of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics degrees at public colleges and universities instead of those from the social sciences. Scott specifically called out anthropology in his comments: “If I’m going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I’m going to take that money to create jobs. So I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in the state. Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don’t think so. [...] [W]e don’t need them here” (Jaschik, 2011). Joining the university with anthropology still in the government’s crosshairs, I expected my discipline and other social sciences to face scrutiny from the state about our worth. What I did *not* expect was the state-led assault on higher education in general that my colleagues and I have experienced in Florida in recent years.

Since 2021, there has been a deluge of state policies that have eroded the ability of faculty to teach and students to learn at Florida’s public institutions of higher education. Public education is a lightning rod for criticism by conservative politicians who see the state’s academic institutions as bulwarks of so-called “woke ideologies.” “Woke” generally refers to a political consciousness of history, inequality, and social justice issues.¹ However, it has become a pejorative umbrella term used by conservatives to discredit and dispute racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression, which they see as detrimental to the very fabric of American life. This is certainly the case for Florida governor Ron DeSantis whose fight against “woke” has made national headlines. In his gubernatorial re-election victory speech in November 2022, he proclaimed – as if channelling Winston Churchill – “We fight the woke in the legislature. We fight the woke in the schools. We fight the woke in the corporations. We will never, ever surrender to the woke mob. Florida is where woke goes to die” (Czachor, 2022). As a result, DeSantis and his allies have gone full throttle in their efforts to curb the influence of “woke ideologies” in several arenas, including higher education.

¹ See Remnick (2023) for more information on the long history of the term in the United States, particularly within the Black community.

Political attacks on higher education in the United States are nothing new (Schrecker, 2022), but recent legal moves have created a grim situation in Florida. As a special committee of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) observe, it is “a politically and ideologically driven assault unparalleled in U.S. history, which, if sustained, threatens the very survival of meaningful education in the state, with the direst implications for the entire country” (Jafar et al. 2023, 2). The onslaught of policies that challenge free speech and academic freedom in higher education is alarming, turning Florida into a political battleground. As a colleague accurately encapsulated, “We’re under siege in Florida” (Schrecker, 2022).

In this article, I provide an overview of the political challenges currently facing faculty members at Florida’s public colleges and universities. Paying particular attention to laws impacting instruction, I argue that recent legislation has contributed to a collective experience of “routine crisis” among faculty at these institutions (Muir 2021). Florida’s political climate and the barrage of higher education bill proposals, revisions, and eventual enactments led by conservative politicians has created a sense of unending upheaval on campuses characterized by disorientation, distrust, and disillusion. After summarizing the most pertinent laws, I discuss how this routine crisis affects not only faculty morale but also our ability to teach effectively.

Higher Education Policy in Florida

Florida’s government recently has attempted to overhaul the state’s massive public college and university systems – some of the largest in the United States – which include 28 colleges serving more than 614,000 students (Association of Florida Colleges, n.d.) and 12 universities with more than 300,000 students and 60,000 faculty and staff (Florida Department of Education, n.d.). With guidance from DeSantis, the legislature has passed several laws related to higher education, including legislation to change the terms of faculty tenure (Florida Senate, 2022a), limit faculty union power (Florida Senate, 2023a), and prohibit the use of “political loyalty tests” in admission, hiring, and promotion decisions (Florida Senate 2023b).² Such laws are designed to stem the supposed “leftist indoctrination” of students by faculty and staff in academic institutions. This threat led to the enactment of multiple laws that directly affect teaching at public colleges and universities, three of which have been particularly impactful: Florida House Bill (HB) 233, HB 7, and Senate Bill (SB) 266.

HB 233

Signed into law in 2021, HB 233 (known as the Online Freedom and Viewpoint Diversity Act) directs Florida’s public colleges and universities to monitor and support intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity on their campuses. It includes several significant orders that affect instruction and the campus environment.

The law mandates that an annual “intellectual freedom and viewpoint diversity assessment” be administered at all public institutions of higher education. This campus wide survey must evaluate “the extent to which competing ideas and perspectives are presented and members of the university community, including students, faculty, and staff, feel free to express their beliefs and viewpoints on campus and in the classroom” (Florida Senate, 2021). While the law’s stated goal is to ensure that students are exposed to “a variety of ideological and political perspectives” (Florida Senate, 2021), the aim is arguably to squash the purported bias against conservative views in higher education.

At a press conference after signing HB 233 into law, DeSantis claimed that Florida’s academic institutions have become “hotbeds of stale ideology” (read: liberal or woke ideology) and that “a university campus was a place where you’d be exposed to a lot of different ideas. Unfortunately, now the norm is really these are more intellectually repressive environments. You have orthodoxies that are promoted, and other viewpoints are shunned or even suppressed. We don’t want that in Florida” (WPBF 25 News, 2021). These surveys are not simply a way to gauge the existence of certain viewpoints on a particular campus; they can be used to punish institutions where faculty, staff, and students may be left-leaning. In fact, the state has threatened to cut funding to colleges and universities that the government thinks are not promoting adequate viewpoint diversity.

² The phrase “political loyalty tests” is often used by conservative politicians to refer to institutional diversity statements. As DeSantis commented, “They will call them ‘diversity statements,’ but it’s really requiring you to sign up to support an ideological agenda that you may not be supportive of” (News Service of Florida and Odzer, 2023).

HB 233 further stipulates that neither the Florida Board of Education nor the State University System of Florida that govern the college and university systems, respectively, can “shield,” or limit, “access to, or observation of, ideas and opinions that they may find uncomfortable, unwelcome, disagreeable, or offensive” (Florida Senate, 2021). Forms of expression like hate speech, therefore, cannot be regulated on campus. Under this law, students also can sue their institution if they believe that it restricted such speech or “shielded” them in any other way. Relatedly, HB 233 also permits students to record classes without faculty consent and without prior notice. Recordings can be used for personal educational purposes or to support a complaint or lawsuit against their institution.

HB 7

Less than six months after HB 233 was enacted, DeSantis introduced a legislative proposal for the Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (W.O.K.E.) Act. Officially known as HB 7 and renamed the Individual Freedom Act, the law went into effect in 2022 to “fight back against woke indoctrination” (Florida Governor’s Press Office 2021). Fundamentally, HB 7 prohibits faculty at public institutions from teaching about certain race-related topics. It does not ban discussions of race but restricts how race and racism can be taught and what conclusions can be drawn from that instruction. For example, HB 7 forbids faculty from teaching that “[a]n individual’s moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by his or her race, color, sex, or national origin” (Florida Senate, 2022b). This stipulation proscribes instruction about important concepts, such as white privilege and gender discrimination, that supposedly drive “woke indoctrination” in Florida’s classrooms. Although not mentioned by name in the law’s text, critical race theory (CRT) is a clear target of HB 7. CRT, an academic and legal framework that examines how institutions can perpetuate racism, has become a buzzword for conservatives across the country to discredit ideas about systemic racism. DeSantis explicitly referenced CRT as “state-sanctioned racism” in a press release about the proposed legislation (Florida Governor’s Press Office, 2021), demonstrating its significance to legislators drafting and supporting the law.

Besides limiting what can be taught, HB 7 prohibits faculty from assigning blame to students because of their background. The law prohibits teaching that “[a] person, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, national origin, or sex” (Florida Senate, 2022b). As such, faculty are liable for ensuring that their students are not uncomfortable because of their instruction. While the consequences of violating this or any other portion of HB 7 are not explicitly discussed in the law, faculty fear that a violation could result in the loss of their job or tenure.

At present, HB 7 cannot be enforced because a federal judge blocked it after a group of faculty members and a student sued the Florida Board of Governors for violating free speech. However, the injunction is temporary, and a governmental appeal is pending.

SB 266

With HB 7 unenforceable, the Florida legislature passed a new law, SB 266, in 2023 to continue the fight against “wokeness.” SB 266 accomplishes many things, including the restriction of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives on campuses (Florida Senate, 2023c). By limiting how DEI initiatives can be funded, the law cracks down on the supposed attack on viewpoint diversity and leftist indoctrination that such programs allegedly foster. DeSantis emphasized this point after signing the bill into law: “If you look at the way [DEI] has actually been implemented across the country, DEI is better viewed as standing for discrimination, exclusion and indoctrination...And that has no place in our public institutions” (Diaz, 2023).

With respect to instruction, SB 266 also regulates the courses taught as part of Florida’s General Education Program (GEP). GEP courses provide core skills and cover knowledge areas that all undergraduate students on public campuses must learn, regardless of major. SB 266 now bans GEP courses that “distort significant historical facts or 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 and were created to maintain social, political, and economic inequities” (Florida Senate, 2024). The explicit inclusion of identity politics – political theories or actions related to experiences, concerns, challenges, or injustices faced by particular groups due to race, sex, gender, or other markers of identity – is telling. Critics argue that identity politics are divisive by focusing on differences instead of commonalities across groups. Moreover, conservative politicians

often link it to DEI efforts or “wokeness” around the other topics targeted by SB 266 – and not coincidentally HB 7 – namely systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege. As articulated by DeSantis, the government’s position on this is clear: “Some of these niche subjects like critical race theory, other types of DEI-infused courses and majors, Florida’s getting out of that game. [...] If you want to do things like gender ideology, go to Berkeley, go to some of these other places, that’s fine.” As with HB 7, faculty fear that they could lose their job or tenure for violating SB 266.

Negative Effects of Florida’s Political Landscape

The multiple attacks on free speech and academic freedom imposed by HB 233, HB 7, and SB 266 have negatively affected campus communities in more ways than I can cover in this article. For faculty at least, the laws have produced an overall situation characterized by “routine crisis.” In her work on Argentina’s 2001-2002 economic collapse, anthropologist Sarah Muir describes living through routine crisis – in “a world shaped by incessant crisis” (2021:4) – as being marked by “experiences of loss, frustration, failure, and disappointment” (2021:9). Framing Florida’s current situation as such a crisis fruitfully reveals how faculty are managing their duties considering the current political landscape.

A major consequence of this routine crisis is the loss of morale among faculty. Across the state, faculty are extremely disheartened by the constant political attacks on our jobs and livelihood. Legal encroachment on us as educators and scholars has become so intense that most of Florida faculty respondents of a AAUP survey described the political atmosphere around higher education in the state as either “bad” or “very bad” (Guan, 2023). Working in such an environment – and as more and more bills pass through the legislature and into law – has taken its toll on faculty members who cannot teach without distorting major theories, methods, and perspectives (despite their expertise), fear for their jobs, or feel unsupported by their institutions. This loss of morale has directly affected faculty recruitment and retention. Faculty are leaving Florida’s public colleges and universities in droves (Susca et al., 2023); my home institution has hemorrhaged faculty over the last five years, including in my own department. Another AAUP survey showed that 39% of Florida faculty respondents have applied for jobs outside of the state since 2022, and 44% plan to apply in the coming academic year; their most common reasons were academic freedom and political climate (Hodgson & Kumar, 2024).

Faculty also do not necessarily feel supported by their administrators (Jafar et al, 2023). College and university leaders generally have proven ineffective at providing guidance to faculty attempting to navigate the state’s uneven legal terrain. They say that they “hear” faculty when we voice our fears and frustrations in response to new legislation related to instruction. Yet their response is always punctuated with the reminder that the university must comply with state law. Such a rejoinder is unnecessary and unhelpful; faculty are acutely aware of the need for legal compliance, and stating this fact does not provide the necessary assistance to remain effective teachers in the face of multiple legal restrictions. Nonetheless, campus leaders simply reiterate what the laws do and do not allow, leaving many faculty members unmoored and anxious about how to do their jobs without meaningful institutional direction.

With respect to teaching, one of the most significant consequences of the policies is the chilling effect. Be they tenured, tenure-track, non-tenure track, or contingent, faculty are deeply concerned about losing their jobs if they violate any laws or policies about course content or if they “shield” students from certain viewpoints. This fear stems from the increased scrutiny that faculty face on multiple fronts about what and how we teach: by the state, by our campus administrators tasked with monitoring our compliance with the law, and by our students who can now record our lectures and are emboldened to file complaints against us if they do not like what or how we teach. This fear is compounded by the arguably intentionally vague and subjective wording of the laws that creates confusion about what we can and cannot do. In trying to decipher how the laws pertain to their specific courses, faculty are left with a great number of questions: Does my lecture material cross the line? What questions can students and I raise in discussion? Will my assignments make students uncomfortable? Will the guest speakers I invite to class bring up verboten topics? Engaging in constant self-interrogation has unfortunately led to some faculty self-censoring or pre-emptively avoiding certain topics or lessons all together for fear of disciplinary action. Some departments or faculty members have even cancelled entire courses because of this fear. For instance, sociologists at the University of Central Florida decided to not teach their courses on race and race-related topics because of the potential consequences (Golden, 2023).

This stifling of our ability to teach directly impacts student learning. In anthropology, we value cultural diversity, socio-economic and historical context, and centering the experiences of marginalized communities in our

courses. This makes anthropology particularly vulnerable to policies that target classroom instruction given the kinds of scholarship that many of us engage in. In courses that are currently targeted by state law, such as GEP courses, students may not receive accurate instruction in our discipline if fundamental concepts, issues, or theories in our field cannot be taught without consequence (Patel, 2024). A clear illustration is my department's anticipated requisite removal of prohibited terms from its textbook for the introductory biological anthropology course to align with state law. Such terms may include "inclusion," "diversity," and "racism." Even when teaching with specificity, through sharing ethnographic examples or other peer-reviewed research findings, the promotion of certain ideas is still subject to state censure. Entire courses are even unavailable to students, especially non-anthropology majors, as part of the GEP, as evidenced by the administrative elimination of my department's introductory cultural anthropology course from the university's list of approved GEP courses (Pettit & Zahneis, 2025). Moreover, the opportunity for fruitful dialogue between faculty and students are limited by concerns about being recorded. This is deeply troubling for colleges and universities where students' backgrounds might incline them to discuss prohibited or "controversial" topics. My university, for instance, is a Hispanic-Serving Institution with a large population of first-generation students, students from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, LGBTQ+ students, and non-traditional students who are eager to learn about these topics from an anthropological perspective.

Both graduate and undergraduate students in my courses have expressed concern about political interference in their education, a sentiment echoed by many of their peers across Florida campuses (Alfonseca, 2025; Cato, 2024; Moody, 2025). In general, my students are very alarmed about the possible effects of the laws on their coursework and the university environment in general. They have asked me one-on-one and in groups about the new laws; some knew of certain laws and not others, and most were unaware of the full extent of the restrictions until reading the official texts. Like faculty, students seemed in disbelief about how many different facets of instruction are affected by the laws when they first learned about them. Notably, students are eager to talk about the laws and their potential ramifications. One instance is when my students asked to begin a class session with an open discussion about the university's response to the legislative changes. They wanted to know how university leadership planned to protect free speech, academic freedom, and the quality of their education, as some of them felt left in the dark. I noticed this unease is also felt across disciplines. My graduate and undergraduate courses attract students both in and outside of anthropology, mostly from other social sciences and health-related fields. They all voice their concerns about what these laws mean for them and their future education and careers.

Teaching through routine crisis demands that my classes function as spaces for both learning and camaraderie. I strive to create a comfortable classroom atmosphere for students to discover and appreciate anthropological theory and become skilled in our discipline's methods. But my classes now are also sites of solidarity where students can freely ask questions of me and each other and honestly discuss the challenges we are now forced to confront in this political climate. Fortunately, the classroom atmosphere is not particularly tense as a result. This is also because the kinds of courses I teach are not currently subject to censure by state law. However, each new legislative session carries the possibility of amending or passing a law that may change that fact for me and so many of my colleagues. If that comes to pass, how can I teach *Anthropology of Drugs and Addiction* without discussing the systemic racism of U.S. drug laws? How can I teach *Ethnographic Research Methods* without considering our field's connection to colonialism and its exploitative and extractive history of fieldwork? How can I teach *Culture, Disease, and Healing* without explaining structural violence, neoliberalism, and healthcare inequities? These kinds of questions haunt me as my colleagues deal with their own spectres.

Where Do We Go From Here?

These are professionally and personally challenging times for many of us living and working at Florida's public colleges and universities. As Muir notes, "Ours is a time defined by the usually vague but nonetheless forceful sense that we see quite clearly that things are being upended in a manner that is ongoing, tumultuous, unpredictable, and most certainly not for the good" (2021: 8). Faculty are desperately trying to pull ourselves out of the confusion and disillusionment wrought by the routine crisis we face. From what I have witnessed, faculty are supporting each other by sharing teaching strategies, acting as sounding boards for course revisions, and providing a sympathetic ear when frustration runs high. But how we successfully navigate the constant attacks on our teaching, jobs, and students' education is often unclear and certainly daunting. The reality of routine crisis makes it hard to find "some glimmer of hope, some promise of redemption" (Muir, 2021: 9).

Even more troubling is the fact that what is happening in Florida is not restricted to Florida. Conservative politicians across the United States have proposed or approved numerous bills that assail academic freedom and public institutions of higher education. Several states have enacted laws that ban or restrict course content about race and gender (Jordan, 2021; Murphy 2024); more than 30 states have introduced or passed anti-DEI bills (Adams & Chiwaya, 2024); and the Texas Senate passed a bill to promote “intellectual diversity” and prohibit faculty members from “compelling” students to adopt particular political beliefs (McGee, 2023). At the federal level, the assault on higher education has been unrelenting since Donald Trump took office in January 2025 (Knox & Alonso, 2025). We have already seen how his administration’s anti-woke crusade against both public and private institutions has led to grave situations that mirror those in Florida, including but not limited to the dismantling of campus DEI efforts (Gretzinger et al., 2025), faculty self-censorship (Dutton, 2025; Rowsell, 2025), and institutional language audits (Weissman, 2025). The effects of these moves will be felt for faculty and students across the country for years to come. Additionally, right-wing politicians in Europe and Latin America lead similar efforts to reform their own academic institutions. The Hungarian government banned graduate programs in gender studies because of its ideological opposition to the academic field (Redden, 2018). More recently, the largest public university in Argentina lost a considerable portion of its funding in part due to government disapproval of higher education. Similar to DeSantis, Argentine president Javier Milei has described universities as “bastions of socialist indoctrination” and claimed that “[t]he cognitive dissonance that brainwashing generates in public education is tremendous” (Debre, 2024). In many ways, Florida is a bellwether for other conservative-led states and political landscapes where there is growing mistrust of higher education and faculty.

Fundamentally, all we want to do is teach in a way that is true to our discipline and the needs of our students and communities. But we need the freedom and protections to do so effectively, to create a learning environment that affords our students the opportunity to benefit from all that higher education has to offer. Politics should not dictate how we accomplish that. At present, faculty unions and organizations are the driving force behind combatting the political interference in higher education. The United Faculty of Florida, which represents faculty at all public colleges and universities in Florida, is active at the state and local chapter levels. They organize events to strategize and defend free speech and academic freedom, share information about legislative developments and the rights of faculty and students, and partner with other organizations, such as AAUP and the Florida Education Association, to have as wide a reach as possible. Lastly, students have proven to be some of the faculty’s strongest allies by participating in protests (Alfonseca, 2024; Bowman et al., 2023; Tavel, 2023); Palacios & Garcia, 2023) and joining faculty as plaintiffs in lawsuits related to academic freedom violations (Associated Press, 2023; Kumar 2022). These actions, in addition to the concern expressed by my own students, are heartening reminders of the importance of fighting the routine crisis that the state’s educational policies have wrought. They remind of us who and what we need to defend.

Disclosure Statement

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