

See also: <https://www.chronicle.com/package/the-assault-on-dei>

DeSantis signs bill to defund DEI programs at Florida's public colleges

Jack Stripling

SOURCE: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/05/15/desantis-defunds-dei-programs-florida-colleges/>

Joining a national wave of conservative attacks on programs that promote diversity in higher education, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) signed a bill into law Monday to defund such efforts at the state's public colleges and limit how race can be discussed in many courses.

Critics of the new law worry it is trampling on academic freedom and could hurt efforts they say are critical to serving increasingly diverse student populations. But DeSantis and other opponents of diversity, equity and inclusion programs say they reinforce racial divisions and promote liberal orthodoxy.

“If you look at the way this has actually been implemented across the country, DEI is better viewed as standing for discrimination, exclusion and indoctrination,” DeSantis said at a news conference at New College of Florida in Sarasota. “And that has no place in our public institutions. This bill says the whole experiment with DEI is coming to an end in the state of Florida.”

DeSantis, who is expected to launch a bid for the White House, has made “culture war” issues a major focus as governor.

Florida's new law joins legislation in 19 other states where lawmakers have targeted diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs, according to a [tracking project](#) from the Chronicle of Higher Education.

Under the [new law](#), Florida's public colleges are prohibited from spending state or federal money on DEI efforts. These programs often assist colleges in increasing student and faculty diversity, which can apply to race and ethnicity, as well as sexual orientation, religion and socioeconomic status. The bill does not prohibit colleges from spending money on such programs if they are required by federal law.

The law also forbids public colleges from offering general education courses — which are part of the required curriculum for all college students — that “distort significant historical events,” teach “identity politics,” or are “based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, or privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, or economic inequities.”

DeSantis said students who want to study “niche subjects,” such as critical race theory, ought to look

elsewhere. “Florida’s getting out of that game,” he said. “If you want to do things like gender ideology, go to Berkeley.”

Students can still major in areas such as African American studies and gender studies. But the legislation has inspired concerns that professors will be limited in how they teach those courses — whether they’re part of the general education curriculum or not. For example, the law requires the university system’s Board of Governors to review programs and curriculums on its campuses, identifying any that run afoul of the banned concepts.

The Florida legislation has been [met with backlash](#) at both the state and national level, where higher-education experts and First Amendment advocates say the state is trampling on academic freedom. They say the law will have an immediate chilling effect on faculty members, who may avoid covering controversial subjects altogether.

“It’s basically state-mandated censorship, which has no place in a democracy,” Irene Mulvey, president of the American Association of University Professors, said in a recent interview with The Washington Post.

Mulvey called the bill in Florida and other legislation like it a “dog whistle appeal” to the conservative base, and part of a “coordinated campaign to maintain White supremacy.”

The governor held the bill signing on the campus of New College of Florida, a public liberal arts college where DeSantis recently appointed a group of conservative trustees. Eliminating New College’s DEI office was among the newly constituted board’s first orders of business.

The signing ceremony drew protesters, whose chants could be heard inside the event space. Christopher Rufo, one of the new trustees, spoke during the event, deriding the demonstrators for what he called their “kindergarten-level protests.” Rufo is a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, where he co-wrote [model anti-DEI legislation](#).

“Florida’s farmers and waitresses and truck drivers should not be subsidizing a permanent bureaucracy of left-wing activists who hate them and hate their values,” said Rufo, a Georgetown University graduate who lives in the Seattle area.

Targeting higher education

Bills targeting college DEI programs in other states have also drawn opposition from students and faculty. In Texas last week, some students waited up to 19 hours for a chance to testify against a bill that would ban DEI offices, the Austin American-Statesman [reported](#). Students said DEI offices offered critical resources for underrepresented minorities and first-generation students, who may need customized help navigating college life.

At the same time, conservatives say the influence of DEI offices has led to the creation of litmus tests

for faculty members, who may be required to sign statements committing to diversity. The University of Wisconsin's system president recently [told lawmakers](#) that the university would do away with any such statements.

A spate of new laws have been passed in recent years that shape or ban discussions about race or gender at the K-12 level, but eight states, including Florida, now have “educational gag orders” that apply to higher education, according to Jeremy Young, a program director at PEN America, a nonprofit group that advocates free expression.

“The focus on higher ed has accelerated,” Young said.

The first wave of such legislation targeting “divisive concepts” came in 2021 with laws in Idaho, Iowa and Oklahoma, Young said.

It is fine for lawmakers to set standards for public colleges, such as a civics requirement for students, said Joe Cohn, a First Amendment lawyer. But banning ideas is a different matter. “The case law is clear that the government can’t select certain ideas that it dislikes and ban them from college classrooms,” said Cohn, legislative and policy director at the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression.

Florida’s efforts to limit concepts covered in college classrooms have already been met with opposition in court. In November, a [federal judge blocked](#) the state from enforcing portions of the so-called Stop WOKE Act that restricted what professors could teach.

Nationally, faculty members say, they are concerned about lawmakers making it easier to retaliate against professors for their ideas. A bill in Texas targeting tenure, for example, has been met with [fierce opposition](#).

Florida’s new law states that a personnel decision, such as dismissal, cannot be appealed beyond the university president. That would eliminate opportunities to dispute such actions through arbitration, which is commonly used today, said Andrew Gothard, the president of the United Faculty of Florida, a union representing professors and other groups.

“They’re trying to stop faculty from having any ability to protest being targeted for their political viewpoints,” Gothard said.

DeSantis said Monday he would like to see presidents and trustees, rather than a “cabal of faculty,” empowered to run the universities. The state’s public college governing boards are mostly DeSantis’s political appointees or people with deep ties to the Republican Party. Two recently appointed college presidents include [Ben Sasse](#), a former Republican U.S. senator, who leads the University of Florida; and Richard Corcoran, DeSantis’s former education commissioner, who was [named interim president of New College](#) after the governor’s board shake-up.

Gov. Ron DeSantis and Florida education

[The man behind Florida's new Black history standards](#)

[The man behind Florida's new Black history standards](#)

[Florida says AP Psychology doesn't violate the law, after all](#)

[Florida says AP Psychology doesn't violate the law, after all](#)

[Florida 'effectively' bans Advanced Placement psychology course](#)

[Florida 'effectively' bans Advanced Placement psychology course](#)