

'Stop WOKE' law fought in Florida universities

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UFF PRESIDENT ANDREW GOTHARD, PH.D.

By C. M. Schmidlkofer
Caloosa Belle Independent

Florida institutions of higher of learning are fighting back against restrictive history course requirements signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis in 2022.

The Individual Freedom Act, (HB 7) previously known as the Stop W.O.K.E Act (“Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees”) took effect in July 2022, prohibiting schools and workplaces from instruction on historical acts of racism, sexism or national origin that the state has deemed offensive.

From the perspective of the [United Faculty of Florida](#) (UFF), a collective bargaining union for Florida college and university faculty, the law limits faculty members' ability to honestly and accurately teach American history and other subjects that will put Florida’s students at a disadvantage with those in other states, according to UFF President Andrew Gothard, Ph.D.

“HB 7 is a gift to those who wish to see people of color erased from curriculum and classrooms across Florida,” Gothard said. “In that way, it is a tool of intimidation and a valuable cog in the machine that would silence dissenting voices through the use of authoritarian powers and policies. When viewed through this lens, HB 7 is not simply racist — it is a clear example of the kind of systemic racism that it would ban faculty from teaching. That kind of irony is not a bug of the law; it is a feature.”

In November 2022, Tallahassee U.S. District Judge Mark Walker called the Republican-led bill “positively dystopian” and blocked its implementation in Florida’s public universities and colleges, according to a [National Public Radio report](#). Walker had blocked a part of the bill targeting workplace diversity practices in August 2022, and K-12 teachers are challenging the law as well. DeSantis’ office is expected to appeal the November challenge.

Gothard said college faculty and administrators are telling UFF they are leaving their Florida positions for jobs in other states while potential out-of-state employees aren’t applying for jobs here, which may financially hurt colleges in the future.

The more recent threats to eliminate funding for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs at colleges and universities indicates DeSantis “has a fixation on ensuring that people of color, their voices, their histories and their experiences are eliminated from every aspect of our state’s existence,” he said.

[Florida Southwestern State College](#) (FSW) Professor Ellie Bunting said Walker was 100% correct in his ruling as the law is a violation of free speech and academic freedom.

“This law is unconstitutional and never should have been passed,” she said. “This is a publicity stunt by the governor who wants national attention no matter how absurd his actions are (like sending migrants to Martha's Vineyard). Academic freedom is the basis for higher education and must be protected at all costs.”

Bunting said as far as she knows, FSW hasn’t eliminated any courses, but DeSantis’ office has requested faculty and professors there to submit lists of courses that teach diversity. FSW’s curriculum has purposely included diversity in many of its courses, she said, so this affects a large portion of its classes and professors.

She teaches a course called "Introduction to Literature," which she said explores the theme of American identity through works related to conformity, rebellion and individual freedom.

“This includes readings by many authors that the Governor considers ‘dangerous’ such as Fredrick Douglas, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Jamaica Kincaid, etc.,” she said. “I have been teaching this particular thematic approach for about five years and students seem to appreciate learning about the historical context of these authors and their works. For the first time, however, this semester, I had several students complain that the stories I assigned in this one unit on identity (‘Girl,’ ‘Everyday Use,’ ‘Indian Camp’ and ‘Dark Brown Dog’) made them feel uncomfortable.”

She also assigns students to research banned books and write about whether or not the book should have been banned. Most of her students appreciated the exercise and expressed surprise that the books were considered “bad.”

She believes most students aren’t aware of the governor’s motives at this time and won’t leave for private or out-of-state schools to have access to education DeSantis has banned in Florida.

However, she said the state is holding college presidents hostage by threatening to take away funding which will hurt colleges financially if they don’t succumb to his demands.

“As the Union president, I sincerely hope no professors lose their jobs if they continue to teach these topics,” she said. “If so, I will be one of them. I don’t think the state has that right (at least for now). However, DeSantis’ latest news conference indicated that he wants the college presidents and boards to be able to hire and fire faculty at will (are we in Nazi Germany?).”

Gothard believes Judge Walker’s injunction will hold, adding that students, administrators, civic groups and parents can contact their legislators to let them know what they value in education. He suggested hosting teach-ins, public speak-outs, banned book clubs and other efforts to provide access to ideas forbidden by the state.

“Finally, they can run for office and help reshape this state into a true beacon of freedom, rather than sham of American values represented by Gov. DeSantis and his policies.”

UFF is fighting the law on Florida campuses, in the Florida Legislature and beyond to preserve America’s Constitutional freedoms, promoting the public good of DEI programs so all Floridians know how first-generation college

students, students with disabilities, veterans and more will be affected by the governor's policies.

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Keywords

UFF, FSW, WOKE law, DeSantis