

Civil Rights Organizations Condemn Passage of Bill that Stifles Academic Freedom in Higher Education, Urges Gov. DeSantis to Veto

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TALLAHASSEE, FL — The Florida Legislature voted today to pass Senate Bill 266 (S.B. 266). This bill places critical faculty decisions, such as the hiring of faculty and review of tenure, in the hands of political appointees. This bill also forbids university and college spending on activities, speakers, events, and clubs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This bill's vague and overreaching language threatens historically Black sororities and fraternities, and other groups such as veterans' services and student religious groups.

This bill targets academic freedom in higher education one year after the passage of the unconstitutional "Stop W.O.K.E" censorship law, which was preliminarily blocked by a federal court in November 2022 following a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), ACLU of Florida, the Legal Defense Fund (LDF), and Ballard Spahr on behalf of seven educators and one student.

The groups urge Gov. DeSantis to veto this bill.

Charles McLaurin, senior counsel at the Legal Defense Fund, made the following statement:

"If enacted, the S.B. 266 bill in Florida will threaten the quality of higher education inside and outside the classroom. In its attempt to stifle the lived experiences of students of color, this proposed legislation targets diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and activities on college campuses. The State should instead be encouraging these initiatives, as they play an important role in creating a vibrant, productive, welcoming, and most importantly, equitable environment on campuses. This bill also has lasting ramifications for educators, who will be at the mercy of political players as they fulfill their roles as knowledge leaders in classrooms. All educators and students are entitled to participate and contribute to a fair and high-quality educational experience that is grounded in basic values of accuracy, equity, and truth."

Jerry Edwards, staff attorney at the ACLU of Florida, responded with the following:

"Just as it was positively dystopian with the Stop W.O.K.E. Act, it remains unconscionable that the state legislature has spent this much time and energy trying to prevent students and faculty from engaging in conversations with which legislators personally disagree. Instead of engaging in meaningful policy making to improve Floridians' lives, lawmakers have conjured a boogeyman out of thin air to expand the government's reach in all corners of our state.

"Free speech does not end at the classroom door. The attack on free speech in education must end here. Gov. DeSantis must veto this unconstitutional bill."

Leah Watson, senior staff attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union Racial Justice Program, shared the following:

"S.B. 266 is part of a coordinated attack by partisan politicians on our right to learn about systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege in higher education. It serves only to undermine progress

toward racial justice and must not be allowed to go into effect. This attack on DEI will remove important support for students of color, erase their heritage from campuses and classrooms, and ultimately lead to increased racial bias.”