

Civil Rights Organizations Condemn Signing of Bill that Stifles Academic Freedom in Higher Education

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: May 15, 2023

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TALLAHASSEE, FL — Gov. Ron DeSantis signed Senate Bill 266 (SB 266) today at New College of Florida. This new law targets academic freedom in higher education by placing critical faculty decisions, including hiring and review of tenure, in the hands of political appointees. It also forbids colleges and universities from spending money on activities, speakers, events, and clubs that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). The law's vague and overreaching language presents a threat to historically Black sororities and fraternities, and other groups such as veterans' services and student religious groups.

In November 2022, a federal court blocked the "Stop W.O.K.E. Act," another education censorship law, 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.

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

"The signing of this bill into law resumes the threat to education in our state. There is no constitutional merit for the government's involvement in dictating what speech is and is not allowable on college campuses. This law is an attempt to reestablish the same dangers we see in the Stop W.O.K.E. Act, which has already been blocked in higher education.

"The location of the bill's signing is also not lost on anyone. In the past year, Gov. DeSantis and the state legislature have spent millions of dollars to distort New College into an institution that undermines academic freedom. The governor also appointed trustees who are more committed to using campuses to stoke the fires of a one-sided, discriminatory culture war than cultivate student excellence. The changes implemented at the behest of the governor at New College are a cautionary tale, not a success story. In the governor's relentless crusade against free speech in our classrooms, the institutional takeover at New College shows how elevating a single political ideology over the free expression of ideas and concepts harms education. A free state does not censor what people can teach and debate in their institutions of higher education. Education censorship laws are harmful and undemocratic, and they seek to erase the history and lived experiences of Americans of color. This law will help no one."

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

"SB 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. The Stop W.O.K.E. Act already censored higher education faculty from instruction that would teach students about the existence and current manifestations of these concepts. Now, this legislation seeks to erase these concepts from campus life more broadly by prohibiting spending on any programs or activities that advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion. It serves only to undermine progress toward racial justice by removing important support for students of color and erasing their heritage from campuses and classrooms. This law will ultimately lead to increased racial bias."

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

“Governor DeSantis’s signing of SB 266 into law today has deeply troubling implications for the future of higher education in Florida. DEI initiatives and activities make the state’s college campuses more productive, welcoming, and equitable. By targeting them, Gov. DeSantis and the Florida Legislature have put students and educators of color at a stark disservice in accessing education. Educational experiences are intertwined into campus life, and Florida institutions cannot thrive without solid supports that prioritize accuracy, equity, and truth at all levels.”