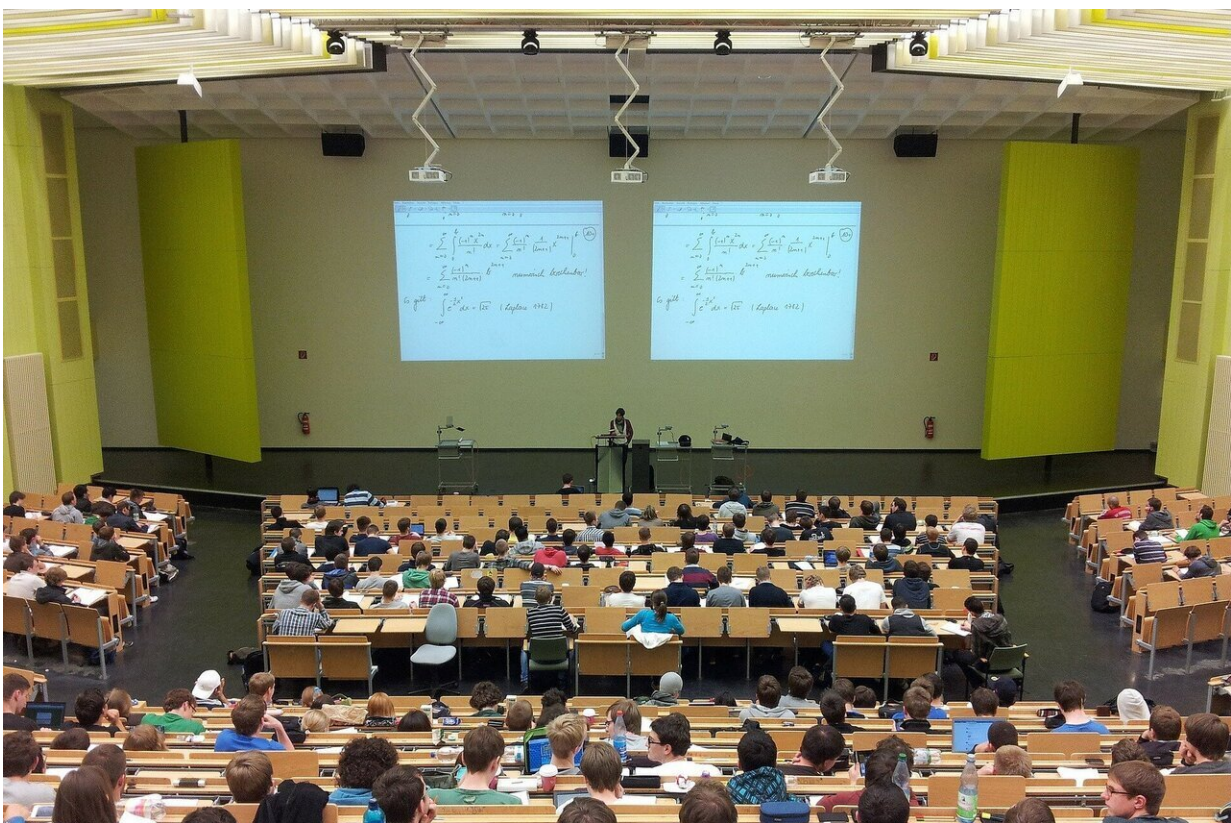


# Board shake-ups, threats to tenure and money: How conservatives are reshaping colleges

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Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis's decision to overhaul the board of trustees at a progressive public college was his latest move in a larger movement

against so-called "woke" education.

"Like so many colleges and universities in America, New College of Florida has been completely captured by a political ideology that puts trendy, truth-relative concepts above learning," Bryan Griffin, DeSantis's press secretary, told USA TODAY, attributing low student enrollment and other financial challenges to the college's "skewed focus and impractical course offerings."

The shake-up is part of a years-long effort by DeSantis and a growing contingent of conservative leaders to chip away at what they view as higher education's liberal bias. They're shepherding legislation targeting diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and critical race theory, including bills explicitly addressing colleges through provisions that would reduce tenure. They're shaping higher education in more subtle ways, too, including through philanthropic giving.

Observers say these trends will continue into 2023 as legislative sessions kick off and key players ramp up their campaigns for national elections.

## **What happened at New College of Florida?**

New College has a reputation as a left-leaning college. All but two of the new appointees to New College's board of trustees are prominent conservatives.

DeSantis's chief of staff has said the hope is to make New College into something "more along the lines of a Hillsdale of the South."

Hillsdale is a private Christian college in Michigan that has been lauded by some on the right for championing conservative values. The college doesn't receive any federal funding, exempting it from some of the civil-rights mandates typically applied to higher education institutions.

The prospective New College trustees "are committed to refocusing the institution on academics and truth and ensuring that students are receiving a quality education," said Griffin. "The campus will become a place for learning and discourse, as it was designed to be."

New College students have said they're drawn to the school precisely because of its offerings and because its values contribute to its academic rigor, as reported by the Sarasota Herald-Tribune, part of the USA TODAY Network. Among those values: building a "just, diverse, equitable and inclusive community" on campus.

In a statement, New College President Patricia Okker said she sees "tremendous opportunity for New College and I believe that our new trustees will bring fresh ideas and new perspectives. New College has a long history of embracing change, all while being true to our mission of academic excellence."

## **Is there a liberal bias in higher education?**

College students tend to skew more liberal than the general population. In a 2020 survey of 20,000 students across 55 colleges, the most comprehensive analysis of its kind, 50% of respondents identified as liberal, versus 26% as conservative. Roughly a quarter of Americans generally say they're liberal.

However, just 19% of Gen-Z adults—the group of people most likely to attend four-year colleges now—identify with the right, suggesting there are more conservatives on college campuses than among their age group as a whole.

"Most colleges and universities are not extreme," said Samuel Abrams, a visiting scholar at the right-leaning American Enterprise Institute (AEI) and politics professor at Sarah Lawrence, a liberal arts college in New

York that is often ranked as one of the country's most liberal colleges. With the exception of some liberal-arts schools, particularly in the Northeast, "students are pretty centrist."

Abrams' research suggests administrators and other leaders—from department heads to dorm staff—are the ones driving colleges' leftward shift. "We have undergrads who are a little bit more liberal than the average American, we have faculty who are understandably liberal but not crazy, as well as some conservatives," Abrams said. "And then you have administrators who are extremely liberal activist progressives."

Students continue to prize [free speech rights](#) on campus but increasingly feel those rights are being trampled upon, according to 2022 polling data from the Knight Foundation and Ipsos. The percentage of students who say speech rights are secure has dropped every year since the survey first asked the question in 2016.

Just last week, news broke that Harvard—where roughly eight in 10 faculty identify as liberal—had rescinded a fellowship offer to Kenneth Roth, the former executive director of Human Rights Watch. Roth is a prominent critic of Israel, which his organization has regularly accused of war crimes against Palestinians.

Critics are blaming the decision on pro-Israel bias within Harvard leadership and describing it as yet another example of the ways in which colleges—particularly elite ones—police thought.

## **Board shake-up part of larger movement against CRT, DEI**

Since 2021, lawmakers in dozens of states have introduced legislation restricting lessons on race and systemic discrimination—often described

as critical race theory—as well as on sexuality and gender identity.

For the most part, the bills have centered on K-12 schools. Increasingly, though, the legislation has focused on higher education. Thirty-nine percent of bills in 2022 targeted higher ed, compared with 30% in 2021, according to an analysis last year by PEN America, a free speech and literacy organization.

Another trend: Legislation targeting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives—for example, DeSantis's "Stop W.O.K.E. Act," whose higher education provisions are on hold for now because of a lawsuit. DeSantis is appealing.

Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute and one of the four prominent conservatives appointed by DeSantis to the New College board of trustees, has been at the forefront of the anti-CRT, anti-DEI movement. He and one of the other new appointees—Matthew Spalding, a dean and professor at Hillsdale—also played key roles in the Stop W.O.K.E. act's creation.

Rufo, through his chief of staff, said he would only consent to an interview if the reporter removed her pronouns from her email signature for 90 days. USA TODAY rejected the request and reiterated its desire for an interview but did not hear back. People state pronouns in email signatures for a variety of reasons, including to avoid being misgendered by people with whom they communicate.

"I was honored to be appointed to this board, along with friends and colleagues from the conservative movement," Rufo wrote in a blog post Thursday. "Governor DeSantis has tasked us with something that has never been done: institutional recapture. If we are successful, the effort can serve as a model for other states."



## Is New College replacing 'one set of extremism with another'?

Mark Bauerlein, a fellow conservative and recent appointee to New College's board, distanced himself from Rufo, however, saying he'll take a different approach.

"I don't have goals in mind," the Emory University English professor emeritus said, stressing the DeSantis administration hasn't given him any policy prescriptions and he doesn't have an agenda for the role. Bauerlein said he'll start by listening and getting "a feel for the atmosphere of the place."

While "the leftward tilt (in higher education) has certainly happened, it's not a problem if we find that academic standards are being maintained—if we find that the ideals of inquiry and discussion and peer review are held to a good level of rigor," he said.

Bauerlein, who has written about and helped the state of Florida develop K-12 standards, said one of his first tasks might be to compare student projects from the 1990s and more recent work to assess whether "there is some deterioration, whether the standards significantly lower quality than before." He's also curious as to why so many students—close to 70%—are female, and whether DEI efforts are crossing the line.

While having little prior knowledge about the [college](#) and living in another state, he's prepared for the host of issues he may have to chime in on, from facilities and athletic programs to administrator salaries and contracts.

"I think that the 'transformation' may be a lot slower and less striking than people expect," Bauerlein said.

USA TODAY reached out to the other new appointees but didn't receive responses.

In a statement, Hillsdale's Spalding said, "I appreciate the complimentary nods to Hillsdale College, but we are not going to serve New College's mission by remaking it into a carbon copy of another institution."

AEI's Abrams emphasized the importance of a cautionary approach. "What Florida has to do very carefully is they can't swing too far in the other direction," he said. "Florida needs to make sure that they showcase how viewpoint diversity works. ... We don't want to replace one set of extremism with another."

## **Another target of conservatives: Academic tenure**

In addition to targeting DEI, DeSantis's Stop W.O.K.E Act aims to weaken tenure protections on the grounds that academics need to be held accountable for promoting critical race theory.

Reports indicate some professors in Florida adjusted or altogether removed classes in response to the law.

Tenure, which protects professors from being fired except in extreme circumstances, has long been in decline and for many reasons, including financial ones, said Irene Mulvey, president of the American Association of University Professors. But "what we're seeing right now is really a war," and the renewed focus on tenure by "right-wing conservatives" is one aspect of it, she said.

Proposals to erode or eliminate tenure has come up recently in roughly half a dozen states, she said, primarily targeting professors who teach about race and racism, equity and justice, and gender studies.

"Tenure is what protects academic freedom for faculty in higher education—it's necessary so faculty can promote the free and vigorous open exchange of ideas ... without fear of being fired," Mulvey said.

"Trying to take away tenure from faculty is an age-old strategy from the totalitarian playbook to attack education to stop students from learning ideas the state disagrees with."

Pressure could continue to mount this year as more states are expected to consider or implement tenure restrictions, according to reporting by the Associated Press. Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, for example, has vowed to revoke tenure from professors who teach critical race theory.

"The larger strategy is to create divisions ... and then exploiting those divisions in order to win elections and build power," Mulvey said. "It's cynical, it's disingenuous, and the consequences for higher education and democracy are really devastating."

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