



Combating 'Idea Suppression'

How Florida Universities
Can Continue their Rise to
National Prominence



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In April 2019, the presidents of all 12 state universities in Florida joined State University System Chancellor Marshall Criser in issuing a statement affirming their commitment to “full and open discourse and the robust exchange of ideas and perspectives on our respective campuses.”¹

The Florida Statement on Free Expression, which won the enthusiastic endorsement of Governor Ron DeSantis, affirms that one of the main purposes of higher education is “to provide a learning environment where divergent ideas, opinions and philosophies, new and old, can be rigorously debated and critically evaluated.”

In addition, the Florida Statement argues that debating ideas and challenging opinions helps students develop intellectual skills and fosters the kind of “personal and scholarly growth” that is central to a university’s mission.

While *The Florida Statement on Free Expression* says little that would have been considered controversial a generation ago, the document is nevertheless very significant in these times because it implicitly acknowledges that the campus climate in American higher education has changed markedly in recent years.

Sadly, many nationally-recognized universities have actively adopted illiberal campus pol-

icies, such as highly restrictive speech zones and speech codes. Moreover, many purportedly elite institutions have passively tolerated “idea suppression” tactics on the part of student activists (such as disinviting speakers and shouting down those with whom they disagree).

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should be proud that their university system became the first in the country to issue a statement of this kind—an act that garnered the attention of many national and state observers.²

The Florida Statement serves as evidence that our state’s higher education leaders agree with an observation made earlier by The James Madison Institute in our 2017 report, *Free Expression and Intellectual Diversity: How Florida Universities Currently Measure Up*. That report suggested that Florida’s university system could gain a comparative advantage in the higher education marketplace by distinguishing itself as a national leader in promoting open inquiry and viewpoint diversity.

Specifically, JMI argued:

Even though it may seem counter-intuitive, all of this campus craziness represents an opportunity for our state. For if the Florida higher education system were to become a haven for free expression and viewpoint diversity – and to become known as such – our universities would be very well positioned to meet the growing demand for intellectually-serious academic study at an affordable cost.³

Little appears to have changed in higher education nationally since JMI penned those words three years ago. If anything, the need for bold leadership promoting free expression in the pursuit of truth seems even greater today than it was in 2017.

Accordingly, this report will build upon JMI’s 2017 report to do two things. First, it will measure how much progress our state universities are making in promoting free expression and viewpoint diversity. Second, it will seek to identify some “next steps” that would help Florida’s universities continue their rise to national prominence as beacons of intellectual freedom and academic excellence.

Assessing Official Policies

Interestingly, Florida’s higher education chancellor and university presidents are not the only public officials who have demonstrated leadership on First Amendment issues in recent years. In 2018, the Florida Legislature adopted the Campus Free Expression Act, which outlawed so-called “free speech zones” at any and every state university.⁴

The case against oxymoronic “free speech zones” proved easy for lawmakers to embrace. As a 2017 guide published by the Institute for Humane Studies had noted:

Appropriate time, place, and manner regulations should not permit free speech zones that limit student speech or demonstration to a narrow area of campus, or that require students to obtain prior approval before engaging in public speech or assembly. The limit of public discourse to such zones has at least two problems: it implies that free speech is the exception, not the default rule, and should be sufficiently quarantined, and it restricts the availability and quantity of free speech on campus.⁵

The Florida Legislature’s passage of the Campus Free Expression Act won the state praise from many national observers. “Thanks to this legislation, students at Florida’s colleges and universities can much more freely exercise their constitutional right to free speech,” noted Robert Shibley, the executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE).⁶

While the Campus Free Expression Act led to the elimination of speech zones on the Florida campuses where they still existed, this action alone was not enough to alter the FIRE “campus free speech” ratings of most Florida universities. The FIRE ratings are assessments of official university policies related to free expression. Schools receive a “green light” rating if their policies are free of significant problems; a “yellow light” rating if their policies present some significant problems; and a “red light” rating if their policies present very serious problems. (See: www.thefire.org)

As Table 1 indicates, eight of the 11 Florida universities that FIRE has rated consistently showed no change in status from 2017 to 2020. The University of Central Florida left the “red light” district to return to the “yellow light” status it enjoyed in 2013. Conversely, the University of South Florida moved in the opposite direction, leaving its 2017 “yellow light” rating to return to its 2013 “red light” status.

Only Florida State University (FSU) made significant progress, moving all the way from the “red light” designation that it occupied in 2013 and 2017 for FIRE’s “green light” rating in 2020.

Florida State’s rise is a testimony to the leadership of FSU

TABLE 1: Campus Free Speech Ratings by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)

SCHOOL	2013	2017	2020
Florida State University (FSU)	Red	Red	Green
University of Florida (UF)	Yellow	Green	Green
University of North Florida (UNF)	Red	Green	Green
Florida A & M University (FAMU)	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Florida Atlantic University (FAU)	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU)	Red	Yellow	Yellow
Florida International University (FIU)	Red	Yellow	Yellow
New College of Florida	Red	Yellow	Yellow
University of Central Florida (UCF)	Yellow	Red	Yellow
University of West Florida (UWF)	Red	Yellow	Yellow
University of South Florida (USF)	Red	Yellow	Red

Note: Florida Polytechnic University (FPU) has never been rated by FIRE.

President John Thrasher, who personally met with FIRE officials to identify ways that Florida State could improve its campus policies. And it parallels FSU’s ascent in the U.S. News and World Report college ratings under President Thrasher. In recent years, Florida State has moved up more than 40 places in U.S. News’ overall national rankings (to #58); and FSU is now ranked among the Top 20 public universities in the country.⁷

FSU’s dramatic rise in its FIRE rating mirrors a similar transformation that occurred at the University of Florida earlier in the decade. Interestingly, UF’s speech code policies were so oppressive in the early 2010s that it once made FIRE’s ignominious list of Worst Ten Schools for Free Speech. Yet, by 2017, the University of Florida had made so many notable improvements that it not only achieved FIRE’s “green light” status, but it also earned a Top Five ranking from the Heterodox Academy—just behind much-celebrated free speech champions like the University of Chicago and Purdue University.⁸

The fact that both FSU and UF now enjoy FIRE’s top rating means that Florida is one of only five states in which two of the most prominent public universities both have “green light” ratings from FIRE. (Arizona, Mississippi, New Hampshire, and North Carolina are the others.) Moreover, thanks largely to these two flagship institutions and the University of North Florida, our state has overall FIRE ratings that are above the national average.

Nationally, only 11 percent of the 473 schools rated by FIRE receive a “green light” designation; 64 percent receive a “yellow light” rating; and 23 percent receive a “red light” rating.⁹

Still, as Table 2 indicates, many of our state universities have

TABLE 2: Schools Receiving FIRE’s Green Light Rating, by State

STATE	SCHOOL
Alabama	Auburn University (AL)
Arizona	Arizona State University (AZ)
	Northern Arizona University (AZ)
	University of Arizona (AZ)
California	Claremont-McKenna University (CA)
	UCLA (CA)
Colorado	Western Colorado University (CO)
Florida	Florida State University (FL)
	University of Florida (FL)
	University of North Florida (FL)
Georgia	Emory University (GA)
Illinois	University of Chicago (IL)
Indiana	Purdue University (IN)
	Purdue – Fort Wayne (IN)
	Purdue – Northwest (IN)
Kansas	Kansas State University (KS)
Kentucky	Eastern Kentucky University (KY)
	University of Louisville (KY)
Louisiana	McNeese State University (LA)
Maryland	University of Maryland (MD)
Michigan	Michigan Technological University (MI)
Mississippi	Alcorn State University (MS)
	Delta State University (MS)
	Jackson State University (MS)
	Mississippi State University (MS)
	University of Mississippi (MS)
New Hampshire	University of Southern Mississippi (MS)
	Keene State University (NH)
	Plymouth State University (NH)
New York	University of New Hampshire (NH)
	SUNY – Brockport (NY)
North Carolina	SUNY – Plattsburgh (NY)
	Appalachian State University (NC)
	Duke University (NC)
	East Carolina University (NC)
	Fayetteville State University (NC)
	North Carolina Central University (NC)
	North Carolina State University (NC)
	University of North Carolina (NC)
	UNC – Charlotte (NC)
	UNC – Greensboro (NC)
UNC – Pembroke (NC)	
UNC – Wilmington (NC)	
Western Carolina University (NC)	
North Dakota	University of North Dakota (ND)
Ohio	Cleveland State University (OH)
Oregon	Oregon State University (OR)
Pennsylvania	Edinboro University (PA)
	Shippensburg University (PA)
Tennessee	University of Tennessee (TN)
Texas	Texas A & M University (TX)
Virginia	George Mason University (VA)
	College of William & Mary (VA)
	University of Virginia (VA)

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Getting Away From Rick Scott

Sarah Lawrence College professor Sam Abrams sparked a major firestorm several years ago when he penned a New York Times op-ed offering new evidence that today's college administrators tend to be even more progressive than most faculty members. A student mob formed and demanded Abrams be fired for exposing systemic progressivism on campus. Only tenure saved him.

At the time of the Sarah Lawrence brouhaha, my youngest child was a student at Vanderbilt where he unwittingly found himself in the middle of an amusing incident that may have helped illustrate Abrams' findings.

During his junior year, my son volunteered to lead campus tours for prospective students wishing to see Vanderbilt's bucolic campus. At a training session, one of the campus diversity officers gave the new tour guides some very strict instructions.

"Never ever make any assumptions about anyone you're meeting for the first time," she said. After all, just because someone is Asian doesn't mean she is introverted. Just because someone is from Nashville doesn't mean he loves country music. And just because someone is wearing a dress doesn't mean their preferred pronouns are "she" and "her."

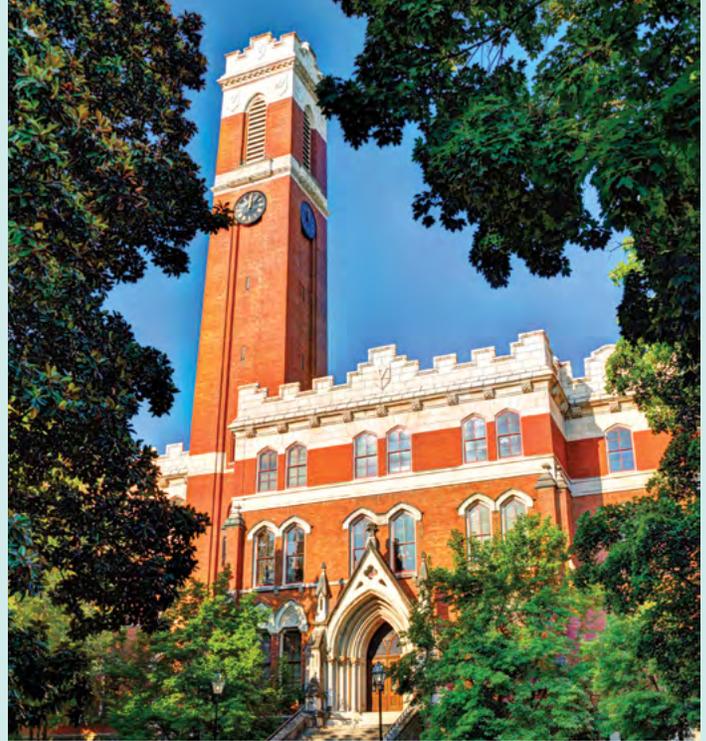
"Never make any assumptions about anyone," she reiterated.

During a break in the workshop, the diversity officer meandered through the group making small talk with various students. When she met my son and learned that he had transferred to Vanderbilt from Florida State after his freshman year, the diversity officer asked an obvious question: "So, why did you decide to leave Tallahassee?"

Before my son could respond, the diversity officer answered her own question. "Oh, I know," she said, playfully elbowing my son in the ribs, "You just had to get away from [then Florida Governor] Rick Scott, didn't you?"

My son chuckled good-naturedly at her joke. He knew the diversity officer was just trying to build rapport with a student she was meeting for the first time. But when the group reassembled, he asked her, in a respectful way, if she realized that she had violated her own rule about not making assumptions about anyone. Sheepishly, she had to admit that she had momentarily overlooked the possibility that someone at Vanderbilt might actually support a conservative Republican like Rick Scott.

When I learned about this incident, I was glad that my son responded to the diversity officer in a good-natured way. The last thing colleges need today is for students to turn every unintended slight or "microaggression" into a "cancellation" opportunity. And



the best way to encourage others to give us grace when we stumble is to show them grace when they stumble.

At the same time, I was glad that my son respectfully raised a concern about the fair treatment of political and ideological minorities on campus. No, I don't want to see conservatives or libertarians or Republicans become a new "victim class" in higher education; but in order for universities to fulfill their truth-seeking mission, they must be "inclusive" of different perspectives. Otherwise, weak ideas may never be challenged, new discoveries may never be attempted, and important insights may never be heard.

Interestingly, several months after that training session, I received an e-mail from a Tallahassee man I had never met. He talked about a recent college visit to Vanderbilt that he had taken with his daughter, a high school junior. The e-mail read, in part:

We have been visiting schools this summer and found our way to Vanderbilt this past weekend. We took a tour of the school and were shocked to learn our tour guide was also from Tallahassee - he was your son. He was as surprised as we were. Anyway, I wanted to tell you [that] he couldn't have been nicer or more in love with his school - he is a perfect ambassador for that university.

Naturally, I wanted to learn more about this man whose family had had such a positive encounter with my son. So, I googled his name. And, lo and behold, this man turned out to be the head of a state commission in Florida who had been appointed to his position by our Notorious Governor at that time: Rick Scott.

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significant work to do if Florida is to join Arizona, Mississippi, and New Hampshire as an “all-green-light” state. And lest there be any doubt, becoming an “all-green-light” state should be the goal of our higher education system, particularly since this would help burnish Florida’s “brand” as a national leader in promoting free expression and academic excellence.

Accordingly, the Florida Legislature ought to consider requiring state universities to have a “green light” rating from FIRE in order to qualify for future “performance funding” bonuses. In many ways, FIRE’s “green light” rating ought to be treated much like accreditation—as a minimum qualification for our state’s institutions of higher learning to meet.

Assessing Campus Culture

It is easy to understand why FIRE ratings are now seen as the “gold standard” for objectively measuring official university policies related to free expression. FIRE provides a useful, easy-to-understand framework for monitoring official campus policies; and it continuously reviews and updates these school ratings. Consequently, the relevance of these baseline evaluations of official university policies should not be underestimated.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that FIRE primarily devotes its attention to assessing the “letter of the law” when it comes to campus free speech. FIRE devotes far less attention to assessing the “spirit of the campus”—that is, just how well the campus culture at a particular school promotes spirited discourse and debate. Obviously, “spirit” questions are much harder to measure than “letter” questions. And while the two usually reinforce each other, it is possible for a school with strong official policies to lack a robust culture of spirited discourse—and for a school with weak official policies to have a better campus culture than its FIRE rating might suggest.

Over the years, various entities have attempted to go beyond the FIRE ratings and assess the campus culture at different institutions. Often, these assessments have paid attention to the treatment of political, ideological, and/or religious minorities on campus. For example, in its periodic guide, “Choosing the Right College,” the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI) has drawn from on-the-ground interviews with students and professors to assess how welcoming different schools are to students who come from a conservative, libertarian, and/or religiously-orthodox background.

Similarly, the Heterodox Academy has based its previous rankings (which focus exclusively on the U.S. News list of Top 150 schools) on a variety of factors—including “notable recent incidents” (whether exemplary or egregious) that reveal something about a school’s culture.

Generally, Florida’s flagship universities have fared well in these

assessments. Both UF and FSU have consistently received “green light” ratings for campus culture from ISI; and, as noted earlier, Heterodox ranked the University of Florida among its Top Five overall at the time of JMI’s 2017 report.

Since that 2017 report, no new assessments from these sources have been conducted; but it should be noted that a student organization at FSU won public recognition from Heterodox Academy in 2019 as the finalist in an award competition. That student organization, The Power of We, is one of two on the FSU campus that has emerged in recent years to promote constructive dialogue across various political and religious divides. The success of these FSU student-run enterprises is due in part to the influence of faculty sponsors committed to cultivating a campus culture that promotes respectful discourse.

Sam Staley, a business school professor who teaches social entrepreneurship at FSU, mentors a number of the center-right student groups (including College Libertarians and College Republicans); and he has also helped guide some of the cross-partisan endeavors on campus. Staley says that one of the most important contributions he can make as a faculty sponsor is to encourage center-right students to invite speakers to campus who will challenge progressive thinking in the most persuasive way.

“Many center-right students feel like an embattled minority and are often tempted to ‘fight back’ by inviting provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos to campus,” Staley says. “Provocateurs can certainly draw a crowd, but I encourage student leaders to ask themselves, ‘Will a speaker like Milo really be effective at winning greater respect for the ideas you care about?’”

Staley’s example illustrates the importance of viewpoint diversity among college faculty. For if student leaders do not have trusted mentors who share their worldview to offer them counsel, on-campus events can easily degenerate into battles between “dueling provocateurs” who fail to provide students with useful models of constructive engagement.

Heterodox Academy is working to engender greater viewpoint diversity among college faculty. In addition, it has recently developed a survey instrument to measure the national climate in higher education, which it hopes will be replicated at the campus level by scholars interested in assessing the current climate at their schools.

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In 2019, Heterodox Academy surveyed 1,580 students from across the country to see how common “self-censorship” is among students in the classroom. Heterodox found 58.5 percent of all students are somewhat or very reluctant to give their views in at least one of five controversial topic areas—politics, religion, race, gender, or sexuality.

► Overall, 55% of the students report that they believe the climate on their campus prevents students from saying things they believe.

Of these five topic areas, politics elicits the greatest reluctance, particularly among Republican students. White students are especially hesitant to discuss matters surrounding race. Males are more reluctant than females to express their views on gender. Overall, 55 percent of the students responding report that they believe the climate

on their campus prevents students from saying things they believe.

Interestingly, Heterodox found that students express greater concern about criticism from their peers than criticism from their professors. This finding is consistent with the results of a 2020 study by a team of ideologically-diverse researchers at the University of North Carolina (UNC) who sought to assess the current climate on the Chapel Hill campus.

Like Heterodox, the UNC researchers found that “a substantial proportion of students report engaging in self-censorship”—24 percent of progressives and 68 percent of conservatives—and that students express particular concern about being ostracized by their peers over political differences. In addition, “some students even worry their course grades might be affected,” according to the UNC research team.¹⁰

The UNC study should be of particular interest to higher education officials in Florida because of the similarities in our two states. Indeed, in explaining their reasons for conducting this study, the UNC team used language to describe their context that could easily apply to Florida:

North Carolina is politically divided—one of the pivotal “swing states” in all recent presidential elections. And since UNC, by law, draws at least 82% of its students from within the state, the students are divided as well. UNC therefore serves as a microcosm through which to understand the pressures and controversies that are unfolding in the state and nationally.¹¹

Another reason the UNC study should be of interest to Florida leaders is because it could serve as a model for similar research in the Sunshine State. In recent years, Florida legislator Ray

Rodrigues has championed a policy reform that would require the state’s public colleges and universities to conduct “an objective, nonpartisan and statistically valid survey to be used by each institution that considers the extent to which competing ideas and perspectives are presented and members of the [college or university] feel free to express their beliefs and viewpoints on campus and in the classroom.”¹²

Regrettably, the Rodrigues proposal has met opposition from the United Faculty of Florida, whose leaders have expressed concern that the results of these annual surveys could be used against professors in some way. For example, FSU professor Matthew Lata has asked, “If the results of the survey were not to the Legislature’s liking, would faculty be hired and fired based on their political beliefs, to change and adjust the political balance?”¹³

Rodrigues has defended his proposal by noting the inconsistency of some of his critics, “If you look at faculty unions across the state, they embrace diversity in every area except intellectual diversity. Why is that?”¹⁴

In addition, Rodrigues has been quick to emphasize that one of the main purposes of his proposal is to assess whether “cancel culture” is stifling intellectual discourse and causing students and faculty to “self-censor” and avoid certain topics. If students and professors feel that they must tiptoe around certain topics lest they “trigger” someone, that is not an environment conducive to learning.

Again, the UNC study is noteworthy because it shows what can happen when scholars with different political viewpoints work together to collect intellectually-honest data that assesses how welcoming their campus is to those with minority views. In the absence of data collection like this, universities are subject to seeing their reputations become grossly skewed by embarrassing incidents of one kind or another.

Consider, for example, some of the campus incidents in Florida that have made headlines since JMI’s 2017 report:

- Progressive students at the University of Central Florida staged a protest over the possible use of student activity fees to fund an on-campus speech by the popular young conservative podcaster Ben Shapiro;¹⁵
- In response to a legal challenge, the University of Florida changed its campus policy to ensure that speaker fees are distributed to student organizations on a viewpoint-neutral basis;¹⁶
- A group of progressive students at Florida Atlantic University hung “anti-Nazi” posters around campus “outing” a professor for receiving grant money from a center-right organization (to run a civics education

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The New **BIG TWO** of the Power Five

The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) would like to be known as the premier conference for scholars who don't want to compromise on athletics. The Southeastern Conference (SEC) would like to be known as the premier conference for athletes who don't want to compromise on academics.

Here's a way for each conference to burnish its brand, expand its footprint, increase its revenue, strengthen its rivalries, and eclipse its competition ...

Trade Auburn and Vanderbilt for N.C. State and Virginia Tech.

Now, I realize "trading" conference members is completely unprecedented. And I know conference commissioners lack the power to move schools around like pieces on a chessboard.

But the trade I am proposing not only would be good for both conferences, but for each of the four universities as well. Here's why:

The Trade would enable each conference to expand its footprint and increase the value of its TV package. The SEC would pick up media markets like Charlotte, Raleigh-Durham, Richmond, and Washington, D.C. The ACC would gain Nashville, Memphis, Birmingham, and Mobile.

Neither conference would lose any of its current territory, and both would surpass the Big Ten in number of states included in its recruiting area. Nice.

The Trade would benefit all three state universities – Virginia Tech, N.C. State, and Auburn – since it would allow each to strengthen its own distinctive identity and get out from under the shadow of its braggadocious in-state rival.

It would also benefit Vanderbilt, which would get to compete in a league with other academically-minded private schools – Duke, Wake Forest, Miami, Boston College, and Notre Dame.

The acquisition of Vanderbilt would strengthen the ACC's claim to be the premier academic conference among the Power Five. But The Trade would give the SEC an academic plum in return – presence in the prestigious Research Triangle that N.C. State calls home.

The Trade would allow the SEC to achieve greater divisional parity and geographic coherence. Missouri could move to the SEC West – where it has always belonged – while N.C. State



and Virginia Tech join the SEC East. Divisional lines would be contiguous. Competitive balance would be improved. Teams would be grouped by time zones. Everyone would benefit. Cool.

The Trade would give the ACC the thing it needs most – another football powerhouse (Auburn). But it would not weaken the SEC's overall power since N.C. State and Virginia Tech have a better football tradition than Vanderbilt. (The Wolfpack and Hokies have produced a bevy of NFL stars, including Russell Wilson, Phillip Rivers, and Michael Vick.)

The Trade would double the number of joint ACC-SEC states from four to eight. This, in turn, would create four more intra-state rivalries that are also inter-conference rivalries – allowing these eight games to be marketed as an ACC v. SEC package.

Suddenly, rivalry games like Alabama v. Auburn and UNC v. N.C. State would take on new meaning beyond their state borders because conference bragging rights would also be on the line. The ACC-SEC Challenge could take place Thanksgiving Week, with two games on Thursday, three on Friday, and three more on Saturday – a certifiable feast of rivalry football!

The Trade not only would be good for football, but also for other revenue-producing sports. The SEC would get a helpful boost in basketball, gaining two-time national champion N.C. State. The ACC would get a similar boost in baseball, picking up two-time national champ Vanderbilt. In addition, both sports could stage their own ACC v. SEC Showdowns similar to the Thanksgiving football rivalry feast. Booyah.

Is it crazy to consider ideas like this in the middle of a pandemic? Perhaps. But the economic fallout from the pandemic and the forthcoming move to compensate players are going to alter the landscape of college athletics in dramatic and long-lasting ways. From where I sit, it would be far better for the ACC and SEC to do something bold and ambitious like The Trade than to cower in the corner like those weenies in the Big Ten.

William Mattox comes from a large family that has ties to Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia, South Carolina, and Vanderbilt.

► *The trade I am proposing not only would be good for both conferences, but for each of the four universities as well.*

- program for people in prison, curiously);¹⁷
- Two Florida universities—UNF and UWF—closed their Confucius Institutes (funded by the Chinese government) after receiving complaints from U.S. Senator Marco Rubio;¹⁸ and
- Campus police arrested an FSU student for assaulting several College Republicans who were distributing materials on campus.¹⁹

► *State universities in “swing” states like Florida are extremely well positioned to provide leadership in creating more ideologically-inclusive campus cultures.*

Were these incidents truly representative of the campus culture at these different schools? Many campus stakeholders (students, faculty, administrators, alumni, donors) would no doubt like to say otherwise; but it is hard to push back without reliable data. Moreover, having reliable data can also help campus leaders detect problems that

they might not see otherwise before an embarrassing incident occurs (like the one described in the “Getting Away from Rick Scott” sidebar).

Indeed, the UNC scholars report that part of what motivated them to conduct their study is the “paucity of reliable data” on campus culture. They write:

Specific episodes—a protest here, a disinvitation there—are interpreted and reinterpreted ad nauseum by narrowly-focused commentators eager to cast higher education in a uniquely positive or negative light. These episodes are often captivating, but they reveal little about the real extent and character of any specific, tangible problems.²⁰

The UNC scholars are right to emphasize the importance of objective data. Accordingly, an ideologically-diverse group of scholars at every Florida public university ought to conduct an annual survey that assesses the health of its campus culture; and university administrators ought to make these survey results public, while inviting schools in other states to release their “self-censorship” and “viewpoint diversity” numbers, as well.

Not only should scholars—of all people—welcome the collection of data; but Florida university administrators also ought to welcome scrutiny and comparisons of this kind for two reasons.

First and foremost, viewpoint diversity and free expression are

critical to the mission of a university; so, we need to know as much as we can about the health of each campus culture.

Second, as the UNC scholars note, state universities in “swing” states like Florida are extremely well positioned to provide leadership in creating more ideologically-inclusive campus cultures. Florida ought to seize the opportunity to provide that kind of leadership, knowing that it will further benefit the esteem of our state’s higher education system.

Filling a Leadership Void Left by the Ivy League

Florida’s flagship universities can and should strive to be a model for other public universities in our state; but the presidents of Florida’s two leading universities also ought to consider using their influence with their colleagues in the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and Southeastern Conference (SEC) to promote campus free expression.

Specifically, FSU President John Thrasher should urge other ACC presidents to sign a joint statement on campus free expression (patterned after the Florida Statement) and to take the steps needed to become an “all-green-light” conference. University of Florida President Kent Fuchs ought to do the same with his peers at SEC member institutions.

Now, at first blush, some may question whether university presidents ought to get involved in issuing joint statements about academic life with other members of their *athletic conference*. After all, the business of college athletic conferences is athletics, as sports pundits like Paul Finebaum would surely say.

Yet, it is important to realize that many of today’s most serious problems surrounding idea suppression emanate from a group of elite institutions that are organized as an athletic conference—the Ivy League. And while the Ivy League isn’t merely an athletic conference, at least in the public imagination, its vaunted status as the premier group of academic institutions is seriously undermined by that fact that the Ivy League does not have even a single school that earns a “green light” rating from FIRE. (See Table 3)

To be sure, FIRE ratings are not the be-all and end-all of higher education quality. They do not measure—and are not designed to measure—many important aspects of academic life. But FIRE ratings do measure something that is foundational to everything else that takes place at a university. They measure just how much the official policies of a particular institution value free expression and open inquiry. As such, “green light” FIRE ratings ought to be a minimum standard for any university that wishes to be viewed as an “elite” institution. (In truth, they ought to be a minimum standard for any institution that simply wishes to be called a university.)

TABLE 3: FIRE Ratings by Conference

CONFERENCE	SCHOOL	RATING
Ivy League	Brown	Yellow
	Columbia	Yellow
	Cornell	Yellow
	Dartmouth	Yellow
	Penn	Yellow
	Yale	Yellow
	Harvard	Red
	Princeton	Red
Atlantic Coast Conference	Duke	Green
	Florida State	Green
	Louisville	Green
	North Carolina	Green
	N.C. State	Green
	Virginia	Green
	Georgia Tech	Yellow
	Pittsburgh	Yellow
	Virginia Tech	Yellow
	Wake Forest	Yellow
	Boston College	Red
	Clemson	Red
	Miami	Red
	Syracuse	Red
Southeastern Conference	Auburn	Green
	Florida	Green
	Mississippi	Green
	Mississippi State	Green
	Tennessee	Green
	Texas A & M	Green
	Alabama	Yellow
	Arkansas	Yellow
	Georgia	Yellow
	Kentucky	Yellow
	Missouri	Yellow
	Vanderbilt	Yellow
	Louisiana State	Red
	South Carolina	Red

CONFERENCE	SCHOOL	RATING
Big Ten Conference	Maryland	Green
	Purdue	Green
	Illinois	Yellow
	Indiana	Yellow
	Iowa	Yellow
	Michigan	Yellow
	Michigan State	Yellow
	Minnesota	Yellow
	Nebraska	Yellow
	Northwestern	Yellow
	Ohio State	Yellow
	Penn State	Yellow
	Rutgers	Yellow
	Wisconsin	Yellow
Big 12 Conference	Kansas State	Green
	Iowa State	Yellow
	Kansas	Yellow
	Oklahoma	Yellow
	Texas Tech	Yellow
	West Virginia	Yellow
	Oklahoma State	Red
	Texas	Red
	Baylor	N/A
	Texas Christian	NR
Pac-12 Conference	Arizona	Green
	Arizona State	Green
	Oregon State	Green
	UCLA	Green
	Cal-Berkeley	Yellow
	Colorado	Yellow
	Oregon	Yellow
	Stanford	Yellow
	Utah	Yellow
	Washington	Yellow
	Washington State	Yellow
	USC	Red

Hopefully, the Ivy League will soon rediscover its historic commitment to free expression in the pursuit of truth. The nation needs for it to do so.

Indeed, several years ago, Yale-educated psychologist Jon Haidt gave a fascinating speech at Duke University describing the teleological crisis in higher education today. The purpose (or “telos”) of education, Haidt noted, is to pursue truth. Yet, in our day, many elite universities have become so enamored with promoting a progressive view of social justice that they have lost their appreciation for the critical role that serious intellectual

debate, challenge, and freedom of thought play in the pursuit of truth.

This, Haidt believes, too often leaves progressive students unaware of the weaknesses in their arguments and unprepared for the “real world” in which half the national electorate votes Republican. Haidt now heads Heterodox Academy, an organization dedicated to promoting greater intellectual diversity in higher education. And many of his concerns are supported by research surveys showing a pronounced—and growing—progressive tilt among college professors and administrators.²¹

One recent study, conducted by Samuel Abrams of Sarah Lawrence College, found that college administrators tend to be even more progressive, on average, than members of the faculty.²² And while Abrams' research finds a progressive tilt in every region of the country—including the southeast—Abrams' study indicates that schools in "ACC and SEC Country" have fewer imbalance problems than schools in other regions.

► *Faculty members often find themselves fighting an uphill battle against the growing legion of "woke" campus administrators.*

Specifically, Abrams reports that universities in the southeast are more likely (or less unlikely) to have administrators who: (1) identify as moderate or conservative, (2) have social and professional networks that include people from across the ideological spectrum, and (3) have concerns about elevating

"social justice" activism over academic priorities in campus life.

These findings no doubt reflect the fact that ACC and SEC institutions are rooted in states that tend to be more conservative than the rest of the country. It is not surprising, then, that these institutions are more sensitive (or less insensitive) to their center-right constituencies—which may also help to explain some of the pronounced differences in FIRE ratings among conferences.

As Table 3 indicates, both the ACC and the SEC boast six members who have earned FIRE's top rating ("green light") for promoting campus free expression. This is significantly more than any other major conference. As noted earlier, no Ivy League school boasts a "green light" rating from FIRE; and two of the Ivy's most hallowed institutions—Harvard and Princeton—receive FIRE's lowest rating.

Now, it would be unfair to suggest that the problem of idea suppression is found exclusively at Ivy League institutions. Or that every Ivy Leaguer is contributing to this problem. Indeed, several years ago, Princeton professor Robert George and a number of his Ivy League colleagues sent a letter to incoming freshmen warning them of the dangers of groupthink and encouraging every student to "think for yourself" (which JMI prominently featured in our 2017 report).

Still, faculty members like these often find themselves fighting an uphill battle against the growing legion of "woke" campus administrators. In fact, according to Richard Vedder, author of *Restoring the Promise: Higher Education in America*, Yale now has 128 diversity officers²³—one for every 17 members of its freshman class!

Obviously, it is hard to imagine any conference ever seriously challenging the Ivy League's vaunted status in academia. But it should be noted that the ACC already has seven academic institutions ranked in the Top 40 by U.S. News and World Report.²⁴ And this number could grow in years to come, especially if the ACC and SEC were to collaborate creatively in helping each other reach their respective goals. (See "Big Two" sidebar)

Moreover, there once was a time—in the not-too-distant past—when no serious observer would have imagined that schools from the southeast would claim the vast majority of national championships in the two major revenue-producing college sports. Yet, 13 of the last 14 national championships in college football have been won by teams from the SEC (10) and ACC (3).²⁵ And 10 of the last 15 national championships in college basketball have been won by teams in the ACC (7) and SEC (3).²⁶

Thus, if the Ivy League does not address its teleological crisis—and return to being what Haidt calls "truth universities" rather than "social justice universities"—other conferences ought to seek to fill the void left by these institutions. And though it may seem like a small thing, perhaps ACC and SEC conference-wide statements on campus free expression (modeled after the Florida Statement) would get the attention of the Ivies and spur them to raise their academic standards in this area of foundational importance.

Conclusion

Florida's state universities continue to make important strides in promoting campus free speech and intellectual diversity. The joint *Florida Statement on Free Expression* is the most significant example of this progress; but FSU's dramatic rise in FIRE ratings is also very laudable—and worthy of imitation by other state universities.

For Florida to continue its rise to national prominence, state university leaders should give priority to: (1) improving their official policies so that Florida soon becomes an "all-green-light" state, according to FIRE; and (2) conducting annual assessments of campus culture which measure how freely students and professors believe they can express their ideas and opinions on important topics.

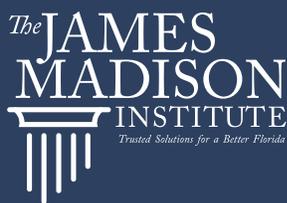
In addition to these in-state priorities, Florida's flagship universities ought to encourage collective action on campus free expression by the ACC and SEC, with the hope that this might spur the Ivy League to rediscover its historic commitment to this foundational concern.

Endnotes

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