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Florida Legislation Strikes Educational Freedom

Naja Johnson, News Editor

The Florida Senate passed House Bill 999, an effort to revise academic research standards for state universities, drawing controversy and criticism due to its restrictive nature. The bill, effective July 1, will require the Board of Governors to approve academic programs and bans colleges from financially supporting programs and activities that may promote diversity, equity and inclusion or critical race theory. The bill follows Governor Ron DeSantis and the GOP's commitment to combat "woke" education agendas and limit discussions on race, gender identity and sexuality in academic institutions.

The bill has shocked the Black community in Florida, which is home to several historical Black colleges and universities, or HBCUs, along with their respective fraternities and sororities. Florida State Senator Shevrin Jones announced on Twitter that the recent bills are an attack on freedom and liberty in schools for profit.

"We now have a Governor whose agenda is totally anti-freedom, anti-public education, anti-worker, a corporate authoritarian who is trying to inject politics into every aspect of our lives with the rich getting richer and everyday folks getting left behind," Jones tweeted.

During the Florida House debates, Representative Yvone Hinson (D) took the floor to discuss how Black student unions and LGBTQ+ organizations would be affected by the law. Representative Alex Andrade (R) responded by stating that those organizations will be able to operate as long as they adhere to the policies and regulations in place.

"Those student groups can continue to operate how they see fit currently, subject only to the policies and procedures that are content neutral that apply to all organizations [and] student organizations on campus," Andrade said.



Governor Ron DeSantis speaking with attendees at the 2021 Student Action Summit hosted by Turning Point USA at the Tampa Convention Center in Tampa, Florida. Image courtesy of Gage Skidmore.

Rianna Miller, a first-year English and psychology major at Seattle U and a Florida-native, opened up about how the state's gender affirming care ban has affected her.

"[This ban] could affect anyone with a type of hormonal therapy. I have PCOS [polycystic ovary syndrome], and I have to have birth control which increases estrogen in my body. With laws that prohibit gender affirming care, it can limit someone like me who needs access to birth control to regulate my hormones," Miller said.

Patrick Schoettmer, an associate professor of political science, weighed in on how the recent legislation in Florida relates to America's political landscape on the national scale.

"In states like Florida and Texas, states where the governors are known to have aspirations for higher office, there is a tendency to aggressively push forward conservative economic policies. A lot of what's driving legislation against teaching African American studies and what Republicans describe as parental control laws in classrooms are demands of the Republican base. This is the conservative base across the country, not just Florida," Schoettmer said.

Schoettmer also noted that the state legislature often holds more power than the federal government on policies surrounding prison, education, or housing. Similarly emphasizing the relationship between state legislation and national politics, Fourth-year Political Science major Liam Jenness explained that the recent legislation in Florida could affect states such as Washington if control of the state shifted conservative.

"It's honestly terrible that these things have been done, but what's important is it's not just Florida that can do these things. We could end up with a Senate in Washington that could be Republican, which has happened in the past. They could propose bills like the ones in Florida that could actually be passed," Jenness said.

Jenness highlighted the historical precedent in the South for censoring texts and literary devices.

"It's insane, but it also does have a historical precedent in the United States. This is a thing that the South has been doing since the death of the Confederacy, specifically censoring historical textbooks and making the white supremacist society look good. It's interesting that the same tactics are being used and that those same tactics are working" Jenness said.

Miller similarly felt that the bills were an affront to America's values

"It's doing nothing but harming the American Dream and perpetuating the same issues that this country has already had. The laws that cater to specifically cisgendered white men," Miller said.

Ultimately, the legislation in Florida has sparked shockwaves and divides across the nation. While Republican legislators consider ways to ban gender-affirming care, trans people continue to advocate for their civil rights in the face of growing apathy toward LGBTQ+ peoples in public life.