

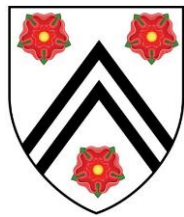


# The Sunshine State Dilemma: Decoding Florida Higher Education's Autonomy and Policy Theatrics in the Ron DeSantis Era

Zachary Resatar

Department of Education

New College



University of Oxford

Supervisor: Simon Marginson


Trinity Term, 2024

Dissertation submitted to the Department of Education, University of Oxford,  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education  
(Higher Education)

# DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE AS AUTHOR OF THE DISSERTATION



1. I understand that I am the owner of this dissertation and that the copyright rests with me unless I specifically transfer it to another person.
2. I allow the Department to deposit on my behalf a copy of this dissertation in the Oxford University Research Archive ('ORA') where it shall be freely available online for use in accordance with ORA's Terms and Conditions of Use [[https://ora.ox.ac.uk/terms\\_of\\_use](https://ora.ox.ac.uk/terms_of_use)].
3. I understand that this dissertation should not contain material that can be used to personally identify individuals or specific groups of individuals (unless permission has been obtained from the individuals) and that such material should be removed before this dissertation is deposited in ORA.
4. I agree to be bound by the terms of the ORA Grant of Non-exclusive Licence [[https://ora.ox.ac.uk/deposit\\_agreements](https://ora.ox.ac.uk/deposit_agreements)] and I warrant that to the best of my knowledge, making my thesis available on the internet will not infringe copyright or any other rights of any other person or party, nor contain defamatory material.
5. I agree that my dissertation shall be available for download in ORA in accordance with paragraphs 2, 3 and 4 above.

Signed [an electronic signature is sufficient]:	
Date:	04/09/2024

## Abstract

This research focuses on relations between the Florida state government and public higher education institutions within their jurisdiction. The study takes a closer look at the effects of legislative decisions pertaining to higher education, made by the DeSantis administration in the 2020s, on faculty members who are employed by the state college and university system. In examining the new relationship between state and education institution, established by these decisions, this study aims to provide context for and clarify two key areas of concern: the autonomy of Florida higher education amidst the policy changes of the early 2020s, and the legitimacy and staying power of Ron DeSantis' restructuring of higher education.

The qualitative research study enlisted the services of eight interview participants, all of which are faculty members at public higher education institutions in Florida. Their stories were collected via semi-structured interviews where the participants were given the freedom to fully express their thoughts and experiences under conditions of strict anonymity. In relation to institutional autonomy, the findings identify various levels of political interference from the state government that infringe upon an institution of higher learning's ability to conduct research and carry out the academic process. In relation to the prospects of Florida higher education with respect to the future, while no one can predict the future, review of the Florida legislative process, together with the findings from the study's participants, suggest reason to believe that the steps taken by the DeSantis administration are more than political theater and indicate a long-term policymaking process, due to Florida's deeply conservative legislature and its willingness to give DeSantis whatever he wants.

This study addresses the new way of life experienced by Florida higher education faculty as they face the culture of fear built by Ron DeSantis and his political allies. Much of DeSantis' strategy revolves around the idea of removing "woke-ism" from universities. "Woke" is poorly defined as anything a conservative in government may disagree with. This research shows how far DeSantis' interpretation of "woke" goes into the practices of higher education, and that if he were to get his way, higher education would serve a completely different purpose than its intended one of creating and distributing knowledge. This research also suggests the importance of including more voices in the study of the changes in Florida, as it is more than just faculty members who are affected by DeSantis' war on "woke" and higher education.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to start by saying thank you to my supervisor, Simon Marginson, for his continued and tireless support throughout the year. His commitment to guiding me as a student and as a person is unparalleled and I am abundantly grateful for the honor of having been able to learn from and work alongside someone as highly talented and kind as he is. I would also like to extend my deepest gratitude to Dr. Xin Xu and Dr. James Robson for their dedication to the Higher Education pathway, as well as their compassion toward myself and my peers.

Next, I would like to thank the eight participants in this study for their time and expertise. Their willingness to share such insightful information was vital to the completion of this project, and for that, I am thankful.

To my wonderful friends at New College, thank you. Nick, Greg, Alysia, Max, Han, Miriam, Patrick, Christoph, Busra, Aidan, Theo, and countless others, you all have made this faraway place feel like home. To Nawreen and Eleanor, your friendship is what willed me to the finish line and made every day before this moment a joy, and I cannot thank you enough for that. Thank you to the MSc Higher Education cohort for the laughs and sense of community.

To my friends back home, thank you. You provided motivation when I needed it most. To Jack, Jeff, and Joanna, thank you for your belief in me and your well-timed check-ins that always left a smile on my face. To Mrs. Badurik, Mrs. Murray, Mrs. McCleery, Mr. Moriarty, Mrs. Schellhorn, Mrs. Stamp, Ms. Davis and the many other educators of my past that have prepared me for this moment, there is no limit to my thanks for instilling in me a desire to never stop learning.

Finally, I'd like to thank my Mom, Dad, and brother Cam for their love and support. I could not, and would not, be in this position without them. To Grandma Susan, Pam, and CC, your love was felt and greatly appreciated, so thank you.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	3
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	4
<b>Introduction: The <i>State</i> of Florida</b> .....	7
<b>Chapter 1: Methodology and Research Configuration</b> .....	10
<b>1.1: The Research Paradigm and its Pillars</b> .....	10
<b>1.2: Research Methods and Design</b> .....	13
<b>1.3: Conducting the Research</b> .....	14
<b>1.4: Limitations to the Research</b> .....	22
<b>Chapter 2: Policy, Culture of Politics, and the ‘Woke’</b> .....	24
<b>2.1: The Role of the Government and its Processes</b> .....	24
<b>2.2: Woke-ism and a Culture of Politics</b> .....	27
<b>2.3: Florida Higher Education Laws</b> .....	31
<b>2.4: Infringement Upon Academic Freedom and Autonomy?</b> .....	35
<b>Chapter 3: The Findings</b> .....	38
<b>3.1: A Chilling Effect in Florida Sun</b> .....	39
<b>3.2: Tenure: Is it a Factor?</b> .....	42
<b>3.2.1: To Stay or To Go?</b> .....	44
<b>3.3: Academic Autonomy and Beyond</b> .....	45
<b>Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusions</b> .....	47
<b>References</b> .....	51
<b>Appendix I- CUREC 1a Application Form Sections C-E</b> .....	57
SECTION C: The research project .....	57
SECTION D: Recruitment of research participants .....	60
SECTION E: Research data .....	62
SECTION F: Protection of research participants and their personal data .....	65
SECTION G: Risks and benefits of the research .....	66
SECTION H: Professional guidelines .....	68

SECTION I: Endorsements and signatures .....	69
<b>Appendix II- CUREC 1a Approval Confirmation .....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Appendix III- Recruitment Email.....</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Appendix IV- Participant Information Sheet .....</b>	<b>74</b>
About the Study .....	74
Who Has Reviewed This Research? .....	76
<b>Appendix V- Participant Consent Form.....</b>	<b>77</b>

## Introduction: The *State* of Florida

In the year 2024 in the United States of America, everything an individual does is political. The beer someone chooses to drink, the books someone decides to read, even the color of someone's hat will make a passerby do a double take. Through years of targeted social campaigning, the American masses are at the mercy of a political machine with only one objective in mind: winning (Franz, 2018; Gorton, 2016; Hersh & Schaffner, 2013). So, it should come as no surprise that higher education is also in the crosshairs of a manufactured culture war that has real-life implications for millions of Americans with a personal stake in the position of higher educational institutions nationwide. Of course, the United States is a big country, one that spans 2,800 miles across and covers over 3.8 million square miles of land contiguously and throughout its overseas territories (O'Neill, 2024). American state legislatures have differing opinions on the purposes of higher education, and as a result of a 18<sup>th</sup> century constitutional decree separating federal and state legislative power, each of them are permitted by law to oversee the legislative process pertaining to higher education as they see fit. With higher education institutions being one of the major targets in the American culture war, one can look no further than the state of Florida, where the sunshine state now finds itself the poster child of higher educational upheaval and the final resting place of 'woke.'

Florida governor Ron DeSantis was optimistic of becoming the republican nominee for president in the 2024 election. He used his new national platform to amplify his actions in the state of Florida and wished to use his statewide policy template, where he won re-election soundly in 2020, as a model for conservative legislation across the United States. His alarming lack of charisma and constant state of playing second-fiddle to Donald Trump, however, relinquished him back to Florida much earlier than even he would have anticipated. Though DeSantis' race for the presidency was short-lived, he still remains the most powerful man in Florida. He wields a legislative supermajority in both the state house and senate, as well as a vengeance for his opponents. DeSantis has a name for his opponents: a one-worded catchphrase used for describing the way they think, how they dress, and everything in-between; 'woke.' He attributes being 'woke' to a brainwashing of sorts, one that takes place in an academic setting where elites impose anti-American values upon impressionable minds (Miller et al., 2023; Rogers & Gregston, 2023). His decision to combat the 'woke' goes much further than stump speeches and angry tweets, Governor

DeSantis has made passing legislation as it pertains to higher education a priority of his second term.

This research is an exploratory project aimed toward understanding the DeSantis administration's short and long-term goals for higher education in Florida, as well as their effectiveness in reshaping the system as they see fit. Their intent is clear, with Florida Education Commissioner Manny Diaz Jr. tweeting "sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course for students. Under @GovRonDeSantis, Florida's higher education system will focus on preparing students for high-demand, high-wage jobs, not woke ideology" (2023). Examining the role that the aforementioned 'woke' plays in the DeSantis administration's decision making will be key to determining the extent in which recent policy changes in the state take effect and begin to transform higher education institutional proceedings. My research intends to provide context to two integral aspects of the Florida higher education institutional remodel, the first being state institutional autonomy, where I ask, "*How autonomous is higher education in Florida amidst recent [2020's] policy changes?*". An analysis of the nature to educational autonomy will be compared to the experiences of administrators, faculty, and students within these state higher education institutions to gauge the extent of the legislative reform process (Enders et al., 2013; Maassen et al., 2017). The second focus of this research process is attempting to answer the question, "*Does the implementation of these policies indicate a broader transformation of higher education in the state and how much of it is political theater?*." I am seeking to answer whether recent legislative victories for the DeSantis administration actually demonstrate a clear transformation of higher education in Florida, or rather, play to DeSantis' political base through performance with little substantial staying power.

I will use evidence from existing literature on Florida higher education, including the legislation itself as it is written, and a qualitative analysis of eight Florida public university faculty members' stories as collected through interviews.

In Chapter 1 I will discuss the methodological process undertaken to obtain the data used throughout this project, the ways in which the data are considered and how my reflexivity as a researcher is connected to the findings in this study, and the importance of adhering to strict ethical research standards as they relate to upholding complete anonymity of interview participants in sensitive political and professional positions. It is also in this chapter that I will explain how the

data was coded into important themes such as researcher and faculty autonomy, the significance of Florida state politics in the newly constructed reality, and key factors in identifying the staying power and significance of the DeSantis era's higher education policy. Chapter 2 will comprise of a literature review including legislative documents, an examination of political speeches and policy agendas, and opinions of stakeholders across the state, as well as reports from the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) special committee. Chapter 3 will provide the results of the interview process and introduce the findings from it. Chapter 4 will provide a discussion and synthesis of the literature review and the research's findings, as well as the concluding remarks and suggestions for further research.

Throughout this project I will build and defend the argument that the DeSantis Administration has both interfered politically with the purpose and autonomy of public higher education institutions in Florida and contributed to a culture of political fearmongering that elevates his legislation to the national stage as well as leveraging effective legislative power that has legitimate staying power.

# Chapter 1: Methodology and Research Configuration

This chapter will explain the processes in which the data used and discussed in this project was collected, the recruitment of public state university faculty members as well as the reasoning for selecting these individuals, the ethical implications of interviewing human participants, and how the philosophical positioning(s) I hold as a researcher shaped the methodology utilized in this study. I remind the reader that the methodology outlined in this chapter served the primary purpose of providing answers to the questions: “*How autonomous is higher education in Florida amidst recent [2020’s] policy changes?*” and “*Does the implementation of these policies indicate a broader transformation of higher education in the state and how much of it is political theater?*”

## 1.1: The Research Paradigm and its Pillars

*A paradigm may be viewed as a set of basic beliefs that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a worldview that defines, for its holder, the nature of the ‘world’, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to that world and its parts... (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 107).*

In order to begin working on this project, I had to first navigate the blurred lines separating objective reality and subjectively constructed truth. This paper will work under the assumption that objective truth is to be found through individuals’ subjective experiences and realities. The lens through which I view the lived experiences of the participants in this study is what lends qualitative research such as this its validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). It was not only through the lens of myself as a researcher, though, that assisted in the paradigm framing process. I also utilized the perspective of my interview participants, attempting to capture their perception of reality as they told their stories (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Assessing their individual positionings within the context of higher education as an established structure in Florida has allowed for me to better understand the relationship between an individual’s own construction of reality and reality as it is experienced by others. Acknowledging the idea that a person’s subjective truth imposes itself upon objective realities, and vice versa, serves as a baseline for this research’s intention to seek out objective truth amidst the social construction of society. As such, the complex nature of the socio-political landscape in Florida has led me to an understanding of reality best assigned to social constructionism. Crotty defines constructionism as “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world and developed and transmitted within an essentially social

context” (1998, pp. 42). Bearing this in mind, the following sections will expand upon the idea of social constructionism and its distinctive application to the events taking place in Florida by introducing the pillars of any research paradigm and their specific engagement with this study.

## **Ontology**

As with philosophical assumptions and qualitative work, there is never a clear-cut perspective that answers all of questions brought into focus by reality, regardless of how badly we as researchers would like them to fit into an easily definable box. This particular qualitative research utilized a depth of exploration approach that allowed for existing notions of philosophical assumptions to be reformed in ways that best suit the case of higher education in Florida (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020; Biggam, 2018). The ontological implications of this research are no different than others with indecipherable boundaries. I first examined Berger and Luckmann’s (2016) assertion that social constructionism makes no ontological claims as it is solely on the social construction of knowledge, thus, constraining itself to only epistemological claims (Andrews, 2012). I then compared this idea with that of Burningham and Cooper (1999); they maintain that the fabric of social constructionism leads to a skepticism of ontological contentions, arguing that because the meaning of reality is socially constructed, it allows for little room to make ontological assumptions (Andrews, 2012). These ideas served as a baseline for me to examine the relationship between political powers in the state and the higher educational institutions, including administrators, faculty, and students. This case revealed the ability to reframe the nature of existence into one with deeply embedded, objective truths that are exposed by the consideration of individual experiences against the socially constructed society.

## **Epistemology**

Social constructionism adheres to epistemological positionings that critique conceptualizations of ‘categories’ of *things* as objective descriptions of reality and suggest an alternative where these conceptions can shift and change along with the humans that constructed them (Andrews, 2012; Phillips, 2023; Willig, 2013). In the case of this study, individuals such as the administrators and faculty are assumed to exist purely within and because of the social fabric constructed before them (Foucault & Sheridan, 2020; Phillips, 2023). The political system is no different, which is why the individual realities of the study’s interview participants are assumed to be shaped by an already

established set of norms and regulations, where they then are left to construct knowledge and their state of existence as humans (Foucault & Sheridan, 2020). As individuals involved in higher education live and work in Florida, the sense of meaning to be extracted from the actions of the state legislature is an example of this paradigm's connection to the project. To Crotty, "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (1998, pp. 43), which neatly depicts the state of reality in this research. The purpose of this paper is to provide context and potential answers to questions concerning the Florida state legislature acting as the world, and the subsequent effect its actions have on humans living within it.

## **Axiology**

The ethical standards adhered to during the research process will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, whereas this section will outline the nature of ethics (Hart, 1971; Killam, 2013) I myself carry with me as a researcher and the ways in which I practiced reflexivity throughout the course of this project. My values as a person, researcher, and citizen of the world align with the seeking of truth in the pursuit of equity and fairness for all individuals. As the state of Florida began to upend traditional accounts of educational practice, it became clear that the need for an investigation into the effect it will have on students, professionals, and academics alike was vital to understanding whether or not these values are being challenged. I am vehemently aware of my subjectivity as a human, and took steps as a researcher to make this evident in my work (Peshkin, 1988). Actively engaging in reflexive research allowed for me to fully grasp the concepts discussed in my conversations with interview participants insofar as to understand why I feel certain ways about the data and how these implicit biases ultimately shape my research (Peshkin, 1988; Wilkinson, 1988). 'Reflexivity as Positioning' as outlined by Alvesson et al. (2008) fits effectively within this study's philosophical framework and also delivers insight upon how the researcher can construct knowledge from their experiences in the field or network (Callon & Law, 1986). I will discuss later in this chapter how I grappled with my own reflexivity throughout the interview process as well as the progression of the greater data collection.

## **Social Constructionism**

"Reckoning with the social origin of meaning and the social character with which it is inevitably stamped" (Crotty, 1998, pp. 52) is the current predicament that higher education administrators

and faculty face in Florida. Where meaning is derived, ultimately, is from the political systems that precede everyone as individuals (Fish, 1990). When the state government constructs policy, it leaves the people in a society to construct meaning from it, drawing from themselves and what they also acknowledge as truth (Harré, 1986). With regard to Florida, the experiences of the interview participants will be analyzed from this social constructionist perspective, which I as the researcher believe provides legitimacy to the project by lending a credibility to the voices of those experiencing reality as they face it.

## **1.2: Research Methods and Design**

I have been fortunate throughout this research process, as I have had very few forced reconfigurations of my intended project layout, but rather, several realizations that helped expedite my processes to their final form. When I narrowed my focus down to higher education's new relationship with the Florida state government, I had also envisioned speaking with those on the front line of academia in the state. Applicable, quantifiable data points from the reshaping of higher education in Florida requires a bit more time to become accessible, as the changes have only begun to take hold within the last two to three years. That is why I turned to an empirical study rooted in the interviewing process, where this method would become my source of data collection with a focus on amplifying the stories as the interviewees have experienced them (Walker, 1997). Before settling on a qualitative methodological approach, however, there were a few considerations to be made. The first, of course, was determining whether the research's method of data collection was relevant to the intended purpose of the study (Bouchrika, 2024). As outlined in the Introduction, the primary research questions are as follows: *"How autonomous is higher education in Florida amidst recent [2020's] policy changes?"* and *"Does the implementation of these policies indicate a broader transformation of higher education in the state and how much of it is political theater?"*. The connection between the focus of the research and the suggested method lies in the nature of the possible answers to these questions; there are unique stories to be told that benefit greatly by being presented via the interpretation and contextualization offered by qualitative research (Bouchrika, 2024). A 'complete and detailed description' (MacDonald, 1986) of all observations I as the researcher would make during the interview process and subsequent data analysis was deemed satisfactory.

## **Interviews**

I engaged in semi-structured interviews as the main instrument of research and data collection for this study. As is a personal preference and my overall inclination to quickly build a friendly relationship and comfortable environment for both myself and the interview participant, I implemented a fairly loose definition of a semi-structured interview, and focused more on facilitating a guided conversation (Knott et al., 2022; Luo & Wildemuth, 2009) where the interviewee had the freedom to explore their thoughts on the topic without interruption. I found this approach vital to my data collection, as the majority of interview participants took well to an outgoing persona and opened up quickly. The interview process itself was unregimented, with the only structure coming from the scheduled time slot of one hour with the interviewees and the four base questions I came into the conversation with, see Appendix I Section C. This tactic gave me the confidence to grow into each conversation and ask relevant follow up questions which provided more insight to the discussion. As an inexperienced interviewer, becoming comfortable with myself and my position as the researcher was the primary objective for me to unlock the full potential of the data available to be collected (Dilley, 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Talmy's (2010) conceptualization of the research interview as social practice assisted in my understanding of the nature of data, emphasizing and expanding the researcher's role in analyzing the data and what exactly ought to be taken from it.

### **1.3: Conducting the Research**

In the build up to the interview process, I had to decide who exactly fit the profile as a valuable participant to this study. My initial inclination was to hold multiple focus groups with from across the state of Florida, but I landed on senior faculty members of Florida College System institutions/state universities because of their unique position between state government and the educational process. These senior faculty members in particular became a high priority for the project because they are a part of the state higher education system, meaning the majority of their institutional funding comes from the state government (Sav, 2016). In order for these institutions to collect this funding and ensure that it keeps coming, they are bound by the state laws and regulations passed by the state legislature (Layzell, 2007; McLendon et al., 2009). In effect, the individuals most affected by the rapidly changing nature of higher education policy are these faculty. I had made an intentional effort to exclude faculty from private higher educational

institutions in Florida for the inverse of the very same reason. It was vital that participants in this study have a direct line of connection to the state capital in Tallahassee to not obscure any of the findings or conclusions made from the research.

Before the interviews, there was a part of the pre-interview process that helped me prepare for the real thing. As is the nature of a master's dissertation, these interviews were to have the highest stakes of any that I had conducted prior. The application of two pilot interviews aided in the restructuring of my questions, how I was to ask them, led me toward relevant follow up questions, and allowed me to work on an efficient use of the time allotted to the interview itself (Majid et al., 2017; Malmqvist et al., 2019; Sampson, 2004). I had enlisted the help of two friends back in the United States to help with this tedious yet beneficial task. Their experience with interviewing high profile business professionals was a bonus as they helped with what to expect in the case of any disproportionate power dynamics. This was also a chance for me to evaluate my interviewing style and ensure it was effective and didn't leave too much quiet time or uncomfortable moments. With these pilot interviews as practice, I became confident I could lead a conversation and not control it.

## **Recruitment**

The first real issue arose right before the recruitment stage relating to the identification of the study's participants. As I sought senior faculty at the many institutions that make up the Florida state college and university system, it became clear that a non-negotiable in exchange for participation in the study was going to be requiring full anonymity for all interviewees. The repercussions for speaking out of favor with the state government in Florida as a contracted professional in higher education include, by law, the potential to be removed from your position regardless of status. Considering the severity of the punishment, meaning even the most celebrated of academics or administrators can lose their access to an income and the ability to remain a figure in higher education in Florida, I began recruiting for this project promising strict adherence to total anonymity. For the sake of those willing to provide valuable testimony about their experiences as a target amidst a legislative blitz, this study will only refer to the participants as faculty of the Florida state college and university system, so as to avoid the many potential identifiers that come with publishing any more of their information.

With an intended interview pool of 8-12 participants, I sent an initial 15 emails with the script outlined in Appendix III. Included in the email was a participant information sheet, available in Appendix IV, extending an invitation to participate while also explaining in detail the specifics of the study, my research intentions, data collection and security, the potential risks and benefits of their participation, and a certified ethics approval reference with the contact information of myself, my supervisor, and the research ethics committee. Of the first batch of emails, I received three confirmations, zero rejections, and 12 non-responses. After setting up a calendar system allowing those who accepted my invitation to schedule interviews at their convenience throughout the month of June, I sent another batch of 15 emails following the same routine as the first 15. This time, two participants accepted my invitation, with one rejecting the invitation citing concerns with the state government, and 12 with no response. Having scheduled five of my desired 8-12 interviews, I sent 10 more email invitations hoping to achieve at least the minimal number of participants before time became a limiting factor. The emailing process took place immediately following the confirmation of my CUREC 1A form in late May, allowing one to two weeks for email responses. Of the last 10 emails sent, one participant accepted the interview within a day and nine gave no response. I sent all of the prospective participants that did not respond to my initial email a gentle follow-up two weeks into June. It was then that the final two participants accepted the invitation, thus bringing the study to eight total.

## **Sampling**

The sampling procedures in this study were purposive in nature. Given the expertise of my intended participant pool, and the intended research outcomes of this project, a targeted approach favoring an individual's position as faculty member in the field of higher education and their proximity to state legislative action was found to serve the study best (Campbell et al., 2020). I mentioned in the recruitment section that email circulation was my preferred method and what was implemented because of its ability to directly contact relevant parties. However, a snowball sampling technique was also employed in an attempt to accrue more potential participants and reach a wider range of faculty (Emerson, 2015; Parker et al., 2019). Unfortunately, the snowball sampling method suffered at the hands of scheduling conflicts and time concerns.

The first, and majority, of emails were sent cold having done a google search and a quick perusing of Florida state college and university websites. It was in these online spaces that I found the

contact information of the faculty members. As I continued this process, searching online within my participation parameters, I began including the emails of those suggested to me via the snowball method by other participants. As mentioned above, none of the contacts shared with me via the snowball method made it into the study because of conflicting meeting time preferences, so the only successful method was email circulation among faculty in Florida public higher education.

## **The Interviews**

In preparation for my first interview, I had reviewed the reading done during the completion of my CUREC application found in Appendix I, Section C, on interviewing elite and expert participants. My main concern going into the interviews was the perceived power imbalance between the academic faculty and myself (Littig, 2009; Perera, 2021), a young researcher with significantly less experience but taking on a significant issue in the state of Florida. Much to my satisfaction, all eight interview participants showed grace and humility to me and my work, offering whatever they could to assist. I am, in general, extremely comfortable speaking with unfamiliar people and rarely does their position in society have an effect on my confidence in communicating with them. There was, nonetheless, an added pressure in this circumstance with this being the most extensive undertaking in research so far in my life. The preparation positioned me in a way so as to be poised while asking questions and trust the research I had done up to that point to avoid uncertainty from the participants.

Every interview was held through my University of Oxford Microsoft Teams account. As per Section E of Appendix I, informed consent to participate in the study was collected via email from each of the participants and the exact sheet can be viewed in Appendix V. Each of the interviewees consented twice to the audio and visual recording of the conversation, once by signing their initials on the consent form, and another time on the record while the recording was taking place. I asked each participant if they were ok with another recorded version of consent, and all eight accepted the request. By signing the consent form, all eight participants also agreed to the storage and handling of the data post-interview. After the interview, the video associated with the recording was destroyed immediately, leaving only the audio which was to be used in the transcription process. Once each transcription took place, the audio was also destroyed, leaving the transcriptions as the only data collected from the interviews. All collected data was stored and will

continue to be stored for a minimum of three years on my OneDrive that is linked to the University of Oxford's Nexus 365 servers. All participants were also given the opportunity to withdraw themselves and their information from the project completely and without reason by July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, though there were no requests of this kind made to me or the Principal Investigator.

I started each interview with a big smile and a greeting, usually asking about the weather in Florida, as I was sure it was much warmer than in Oxford. I kept things noticeably light for the first five minutes, asking each participant if they would like any further clarification on any of the study's details before we began. Of the eight interviewees, five of them made a comment about my position as a master's student at the University of Oxford before we had even exchanged pleasantries, granting me a high level of respect that I appreciated but am unsure I earned being a complete stranger (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2012; Warikoo, 2018). These exchanges were some of the first instances where it felt as though my association with an institution such as Oxford put me in a better position as a researcher than if I were elsewhere. It took another participant to realize that my supervisor and Principal Investigator of this project is Simon Marginson to begin really opening up to me. After the realization, that particular interview became the longest, most extensive, and most enthusiastic of the eight included in this study. The interviews ranged in length from 41 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes. The most popular scheduled time slot for an interview, with Florida being in the Eastern Time zone, was between 3 P.M. and 5 P.M. EST. That meant I was conducting interviews between 8 P.M. and 10 P.M. BST, which was not a problem as I preferred working at night.

## **Questions**

The interviews themselves got easier to conduct as they went on. They also became more fluid after I tweaked some glaring issues. Even after the two preparatory pilot interviews, during the first legitimate conversation I became aware of a clarity concern with my questioning that left the interviewee with an understanding of my intentions, but at a loss with regard to how to answer. The question was not a 'zinger' by any means, but rather, too vague and could not be pinned down so as to receive an appropriate response. This problem was workshopped soon after and was avoided from then on. Another change I made on the fly was how to manage situations where the participant does not talk as much as the others. As evidenced by the shortest interview time of 41 minutes, well under an hour, I struggled to ask substantial follow-up questions when the

interviewee was not as open as I was used to, rendering a few moments of awkward silence while I composed myself and the next question. Thankfully, after bringing a few extra prepared follow up questions than I would have liked to the subsequent interviews, I rarely had to use them and instead, the conversations flowed freely as desired.

In the Findings chapter, I will discuss at length the themes that arose from these conversations but here is where I will introduce the topics that led to them, all of which can be found in Section C of Appendix I. The easiest question was the first one after our introductions. I asked each participant about their own experiences in Florida academia, taking particular interest in the comparison between life before the overhaul of higher education policy and the current day. This was a deliberate attempt to set the questioning process as an inquiry into how, if at all, life has changed in Florida higher education in recent years. My reason for doing so lies in the research questions themselves; new legislation has the documented ability to change people's lives, but the measure of that impact can range from not at all to completely. Disrupting the status quo is uncomfortable for people, for better or worse, I sought out to provide context to that when I undertook this project. The study's participants understood my decision to take this approach and did their best to provide adequate responses, which they did.

The remainder of the topics focused on the impact of everyday functions within a state higher education institution. I was very interested in both the internal and external pressures upon the participants from stakeholders such as the higher-ups within an institution and state government figures (Ferrero-Ferrero et al., 2018; Marshall & Marshall, 2018). In this search I became increasingly attentive to the relationship between those two groups and how their interactions shaped the perspectives of the participants and the participants' relationship with the institution. The effect of legislation on Florida institutional research output and capabilities was the next topic to be discussed. This question, while providing excellent insight into the new reality of securing grants and approval for research in the new gray area of 'wokeism,' gave way to an important sub-research question which pertains to faculty retention and recruitment. It should come as no surprise that a higher education institution's ability to perform at a high level when it comes to research output and academic prowess can be traced back to the quality of the faculty it has within its ranks (Schlechty & Vance, 1983). Actively pushing away those within your ranks, however, while

simultaneously placing obstacles in front of prospective faculty, can function as a limiting factor in an institution's ability to maintain its high quality.

The last three topics intended to combine lived reality and conjecture based on the lived realities of the participants. I first asked about the current state of autonomy in Florida higher education, and in doing so, was met with a plethora of responses. As I had hoped, the concerns raised covered the timeline from years prior to now and included thoughts on the future of knowledge creation and dissemination. After doing so, I shifted the conversation over to the projected lifespan of DeSantis era education policies and their staying power. This question faced the most uncertainty because nobody can predict the future, but some participants used their experience elsewhere facing infringements upon higher education to inform their answers. I was quite surprised by the connections made in this section as it took an unexpected but appreciated route in providing context to a historical period unraveling in modern time. I lastly wanted to know the next steps for the participants in their respective positions. Here, the answers varied widely with respect to their status as professionals and their proximity to retirement. This was the perfect time to ask follow ups like whether or not they would recommend a young academic move and work within the Florida state higher education system and whether or not attacks on tenure play into their decision making. After the interviews had come to a natural conclusion, I stopped the recordings, spoke with the interviewee for a bit, and then we ended the conversation.

## **Coding of the Data**

The data from this research was analyzed thematically. I used both inductive and deductive coding techniques and carried them out manually using the Microsoft Word application connected to my University Nexus account. I decided that inductive coding best served the purposes of this research in order to explore what arose from the data and to not confine it to any pre-existing assumptions. The thing that excited me most about this research before conducting it was the potential to uncover something in an emerging area of American higher education. In order to maintain a sense of control over the vast amounts of data that I collected, I took notes during each of the eight interviews if and when we came across any ideas pertaining to academic autonomy or DeSantis' political reach in Florida higher education. In doing this, I invited the idea of deductive coding into the project as well by preparing for discussions centered around already established means of higher education institutional interference, which is where the themes of code intermixed with

what came organically in the interviews. This research is in an interesting area of study, where there has certainly been interference from outside political actors before, there has not been one as intrusive and prolonged as is the case in DeSantis' Florida (AAUP, 2023). For this reason, both inductive and deductive coding was used to either uncover new themes that may arise from the relatively limited body of work on American state government interference in higher education, or follow along with previous examples of political intervention and its effect on academic autonomy (Chandra & Shang, 2019; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). It is to be said that inductive coding was the more prevalent technique of the two used in this work.

To begin, I took the anonymized interview transcripts from the data collection process and began sorting the raw data into recognizable concepts and ideas based on the notes I had taken that linked parts of one interview to another (Chandra & Shang, 2019). After identifying potential key pieces of information, I organized a list of recurring ideas that were relevant to the research questions and continued building the list with important subthemes that added value to the findings that had become the three themes presented in Chapter 3 (Basit, 2003). The prevalence of relevant subthemes allowed me to better present the findings with a greater range of examples supporting the argument.

## **Reflexivity Revisited**

As part of my commitment to reflexive research as a qualitative researcher, I will now discuss the manner of my reflexivity throughout the data collection process. Having been interested in the steps the Florida state government is taking to change higher education within its borders, it would only be human to acknowledge my own thoughts and opinions about it. The way I transformed this self-realization from a potential bias into a useful tool to be utilized throughout this project was to recognize the times my subjectivity was engaged, make notes of these moments, and examine them critically having then removed myself from the situation that elicited them (Peshkin, 1988). For example, I can recall multiple moments when I was conducting an interview and after the participant had said something I imagined being true from the outset, I smiled and nodded in agreement. In order to produce a piece of work that is in harmony with the researchers' philosophical positions, and not skewed or distorted by them, it was important for me to step back from these moments and examine why this individual's account matters within the context of policy overhaul in Florida. To remove myself completely from this research would be both

impossible and the wrong thing to do. Instead, I committed to ensuring that this piece of qualitative research boosted the accounts of my participants by accounting for my subjectivity as a person and researcher.

#### **1.4: Limitations to the Research**

This project was quite time intensive. Sacrifices needed to be made for the sake of time management and the most significant hit this study took was the sample size. From the outset, my supervisor and I had agreed that 8-12 participants for a study of this nature, within the time constraints of a one-year master's program and less than that with complete focus on the research, was sufficient. I do not, however, confuse sufficiency with abundance. Limiting the sample size to 8 individuals, regardless of their importance or experience, invites concern over its generalizability. With additional time, I would have liked to include many more participants. Also, with respect to the sample, my desire to include senior faculty among the Florida state colleges and universities has excluded other valuable voices stuck between their positions as either students, adjunct professors, or professional staff and the new legislation changing their life in higher education.

With time constraints came cost restraints. In a perfect world, I would have preferred to conduct this research in Florida instead of completely remote in the United Kingdom to build a greater rapport with the participants and tour the facilities undergoing both tangible and intangible changes. Qualitative research relies so heavily on the researcher and while I am satisfied with how the study turned out, there is no replacement for in-person interactions when people are the center of the project. That being said, the budget did not exist for a return flight across the Atlantic Ocean, travel around the state of Florida, and accommodation so this study was cost-effective if anything.

Despite my greatest efforts to include relevant literature on this pertinent issue, there is a limitation inherent to research being conducted on current events as there is not enough peer-reviewed work on the topic. Much of this phenomenon has yet to be fully understood as to its impact on Florida communities and higher education systems, which explains the lack of established literature. The way around this obvious limitation was having a greater reliance on media sources, press releases, and government documents to help maneuver the academic space. I would also like to acknowledge the clear limitation of using interviews as a method of finding the truth. Though the truth can be extrapolated from the experiences of individuals, this method of data collection also

invites potential criticism because of the challenge that exists when attempting to verify the truth (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The interviewees willingness to share information is integral to the success of qualitative interviews, and while it is their every right as a participant of this study to withhold information, simply the presence of the researcher during the data collection process can hinder the effectiveness of this method (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Roulston & Choi, 2018). Lastly, the interview method is also open to criticism stemming from the idea that using my voice as a researcher can indicate a desirability that manifests itself in the outcome of the research (Bergen & Labonté, 2020).

## **Chapter 2: Policy, Culture of Politics, and the ‘Woke’**

Chapter 2 will explore the political landscape in Florida, its state government makeup and structure, and the influence it takes from, as well as exports to, the greater United States. A deep dive into Ron DeSantis’ sworn enemy, ‘wokeism,’ and the anti-woke education legislation he’s passed in hopes of defeating it, will provide context to the findings and experiences shared by the participants of this study. The purpose of this chapter is to frame the actions of the Florida state legislature as politically motivated with the intention of reshaping the way that higher education institution’s function. This information will function as the groundwork for further discussion pertaining to the research questions and the attempt to provide meaningful contributions toward answering them. I will argue that being anti-woke is also anti-education, thus lending credibility to the argument that educational autonomy is under fire in Florida as DeSantis’ assault on education continues.

### **2.1: The Role of the Government and its Processes**

In the United States there exists a separation of powers between the federal government, state governments, and local municipal governments. The 10<sup>th</sup> amendment of the United States Constitution reserves all powers not explicitly given to the federal government to the states, or the people at large (U.S., 1791). Education is not explicitly listed as a power bestowed unto the federal government, so it is for this reason that higher education in America is overseen on a state-by-state basis. The federal government has very little persuasion over the state governments in this regard, however, they do distribute federal funds to the states to be then redistributed among public higher education institutions at the state government’s discretion (Layzell, 2007; Sav, 2016). One of the only ways, then, to influence state education policy is through the withholding of federal funds. This, however, is currently not being discussed among federal responses as a form of retaliation due to legal complications. Herein lies the discrepancy between federal and state education standards, helping explain why Florida has made national headlines and substantial headway on higher education reform without so much as a batted eye from Washington, D.C.

In Florida, the government structure is remarkably similar to the federal system. The governor acts as the head of state, there are two legislative bodies being the state house of representatives and the state senate, and there is a state supreme court. Individual departments such as the department of education, health, and state, function as the statewide authority of their field and work with the

legislature on issues related to their cause. These branches of government function effectively the same as their counterparts in D.C., but there are some caveats that are necessary to be observed in order to fully understand the issue of higher education reform in Florida. The Florida state government is enjoying what is called a trifecta. A trifecta is a phenomenon in which there is single-party control of the governorship, the state house of representatives, and the state senate. Since 1992 there have been 25 republican trifectas in Florida, as opposed to only one democratic (Ballotpedia, 2024b), well establishing Florida as a conservative state for all intents and purposes. What is special about the republican trifecta of the Ron DeSantis' era is that it includes a supermajority, which equates to a two-thirds majority, in both houses of the state legislature (Klas, 2022). A supermajority "is a requirement for a proposal to gain a specified level or type of support that exceeds a simple majority in order to have effect" that gives Ron DeSantis a blank check to pass his legislative initiatives (Ballotpedia, 2024c). A supermajority in government is the ideal situation of either political party as it allows for the one in power to bypass any and all political opposition. I will now discuss the pieces of the legislative puzzle in Florida to begin making a case that Florida's legislative makeup plays a significant role in DeSantis' ability to reshape higher education.

## **Florida Department of Education and the Board of Governors**

The Florida Department of Education serves as the governing body of public education in the state which includes the higher education institutions this research is concerned with. This department also oversees the funding distribution to these institutions (Sav, 2016). The commissioner of the Florida Department of Education, Manny Diaz Jr. is an unofficial spokesperson for Ron DeSantis's anti-woke educational agenda. Though Diaz Jr.'s party affiliation is officially non-partisan, the dominance of conservative state politics suggests anything but an impartial head of the department. Diaz Jr.'s appointment was made by the Florida Board of Governors (Ballotpedia, 2024a), the most influential body in Florida higher education. The Board of Governors is specifically tasked with overseeing the operation and management of the twelve Florida public university institutions and comprises:

[...] seventeen members, fourteen of whom are appointed by the Florida Governor and confirmed by the Florida Senate for a term of seven years. The remaining members include the Chair of the Advisory Council of Faculty Senates, the Commissioner of Education, and the Chair of the Florida Student Association. (Governors, 2022)

As a result of the republican supermajority in the Florida Senate, Ron DeSantis' Board of Governors appointees have been confirmed at will and required zero additional vetting. The current Chair and Vice-Chair of the Board, Brian Lamb and Alan Levine respectively, are both DeSantis appointees (Staff, 2019, 2023) and staunch allies, with voting records that align with and reflect their close relationships. Though Lamb previously served on the Board of Trustees at the University of South Florida, he is the head of wealth and asset management at Fifth Third Bank (Staff, 2019). Adding to the list of executives serving on the Board of Governors in Florida are Tim Cerio, Alan Levine, Aubrey Edge, Edward Haddock, Carson Good, Ken Jones, Charles Lydecker, Craig Mateer, Jose Oliva, and Eric Silagy. 10 of the total 17 members of the Board maintain either President or CEO status in companies specializing in power and gas, insurance, or wealth and capital management with no previous experience in higher education besides when they obtained their own degrees (Florida, 2024a). Edward Haddock is the one exception, as he is the President and founder of a private for-profit university. This is the makeup of the most important body in higher education in Florida so it is crucial to understand the power dynamics in play with regard to the passage of anti-woke education legislation and the people and systems it must get through to take effect.

## **The Board of Trustees**

The last remaining government structure to have a substantial impact on higher education in Florida is the Board of Trustees. "Each State University System institution has a 13-member Board of Trustees, of which five citizen members are appointed by the Board of Governors in accordance with the Board's Trustee Selection and Appointment Process" (Florida, 2024b). The vetting process for appointments made by the Board of Governors includes the "[consideration of] professional and business experience, prior public service, diversity, personal integrity, and the ability of the applicant to devote sufficient time and attention necessary to fulfill the fiduciary responsibilities incumbent upon trustees as public officers of a state university" (Florida, 2024b). Six more appointments are made directly by the Governor and the two remaining positions are

given to the chair of the faculty senate and the president of Student Government at the respective institution. Again, due to the conservative political control in Florida and the systems in place that allow for single-party dominance of a legislature, it is DeSantis and DeSantis' appointees that are making all of the decisions in higher education, helping to explain why Florida has the most curriculum censorship in the United States (PEN, 2023).

## **The Government's Motivations**

Given the DeSantis administration's penchant for reform, the Governor has signed a flurry of higher education related legislation into law with the main purpose of defeating the 'woke' and reintroducing conservative values to an institution that is thought to have foregone them. For the years 2020 through 2023, Florida leads the United States in anti-equity, anti-woke ideological legislation having introduced 23 bills and passing 10, eight of which have to do with education (Gupton & O'Sullivan, 2024). The establishment of a deeply conservative educational infrastructure has raised alarm bells within Florida and around the United States with its regressive nature and capability of eroding the existing foundations of educational autonomy within higher educational institutions. In the following sections, I will attempt to define 'woke' as it is used as a blanket statement by Florida republicans and examine the aforementioned policies at the heart of the higher education reform movement in Florida.

### **2.2: Woke-ism and a Culture of Politics**

Understanding what it means to be 'woke' in America is not as straightforward as adhering to a textbook definition. 'Woke' has historical ties to the African American civil rights movement in the United States (Dictionary, 2023b). The 1950s and 60s were a time of making good trouble; desegregation activists fighting the good fight adopted the word to mean being well-informed, up to date, and vigilant (Dictionary, 2023b). In fact, which was by definition the meaning of the word: awareness. Over time its meaning began to change, as the depiction of individuals associated with 'woke' was that of being alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice. "Woke' as it exists in the world, or 'wokeism', by definition is "progressive or left-wing attitudes or practices, esp. those opposing social injustice or discrimination, that are viewed as doctrinaire, self-righteous, pernicious, or insincere" (Dictionary, 2023c) which is viewed depreciatively by the users of the word. The perception of 'woke' is now far from the days of fighting racial injustice and instead is used as a label or insult for something an American conservative wouldn't agree with. Though

‘woke’ has a legitimate definition on the authority of well-respected dictionaries like the Oxford-English dictionary, the one used in this study, that does not mean the Florida governor’s usage of the word takes that into consideration.

An unassuming reader may believe that being alert to social injustices is a good thing, especially in the context of education. As young adults we were commonly told that if we do not learn our history, we are doomed to repeat it. My job as a researcher is to provide a thorough analysis of the weaponization of ‘woke’, what it means when top legislators in one of the largest and most populace states in America use it as an explanation for their policy suggestions, and how individuals in all positions of Florida higher education are affected by their subsequent decision making

### **Who- or What- is ‘Woke’**

“Florida is where ‘woke’ goes to die”, DeSantis (2023) said to a raucous crowd of republicans as part of his stump speech for president. He and his fellow conservative lawmakers have made no mystery of their thoughts about the ‘woke’ and how it should be dealt with by openly calling to crush it completely. Their language makes their intentions clear, but their enemy still remains vaguely unidentified. It has been determined that ‘woke’ now stands-in for a left-wing agenda, anything that can be construed as anti-Christian and anti-American, but even then these enemies appear as nothing more than an idea that can exist in many forms and in plenty of places. To DeSantis, ‘wokeism’ is not just a problem specific to Florida. His entire presidential campaign was fueled by a hatred for the ‘woke’, as evidenced by a 19-second unedited speaking clip in which he mentioned the term six times at a Mom’s for Liberty conservative campaign event in Philadelphia (@RonFilipkowski, 2023). His bigger plans to eradicate the ‘woke mind-virus’ were put on hold, however, because of his early exit from the presidential race, so he decided to refocus on Florida where he had exponentially more power and influence. This section will continue to uncover the meaning of ‘woke,’ and more importantly, how DeSantis and republican lawmakers have woven the term into the social fabric of the state subsequently making it easier to legislate against.

In order to grasp the implications of anti-woke education legislation in Florida, ‘woke’ can no longer remain just a buzz word, it must be properly defined so all members of society understand what those who use it truly mean. And while state officials may continue to use ‘woke’ as a blanket

phrase for all things ‘liberal,’ the public ought to become aware of its anti-inclusionary nature. ‘Woke’ targets anti-racist, pro-inclusivity behaviors and mindsets and labels them as discriminatory (Schoorman, 2024). The government of Florida is eroding society’s faith in public education with each of its moves to either rewrite the history books or put an end to the global push for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Right-wing fear of woke-ism is not a phenomenon only to be found Florida, though, as the success of Florida’s anti-woke education legislation has reverberated through conservative channels of government nationwide acting as the source for ‘copy-cat’ laws across the country (Schoorman, 2024).

### **New College of Florida: A Power Play**

New College of Florida was a small liberal arts college in Sarasota, Florida, which possessed a welcoming aura and had a penchant for progress. Patricia Okker led the college as President, and as President, Okker oversaw the day-to-day activities of the institution and stood as a beacon for inclusivity across the diverse student body and around America. This all changed abruptly when, in January of 2023, amidst an onslaught of anti-woke educational legislation, Governor Ron DeSantis appointed six new members to the New College of Florida’s Board of Trustees (Governor, 2023a). The new Board moved quickly to oust Okker from her position within the same month that they were appointed. The appointment of New College of Florida’s newest Board of Trustees members, much like the Board of Governors, was influenced heavily by politics and came with significant educational and institutional implications. Christopher Rufo, Matthew Spalding, Charles R. Kesler, Mark Bauerlein, Debra Jenks, and Jason Speir were the six Governor’s appointees to the Board (Governor, 2023a). The reaction to this move was one of shock and disheartenment, as it signaled a clear departure from the days of institutional freedom. Many higher education academics believe there has never before been a complete takeover of a university for political reasons that matches the scale of what has happened at New College of Florida (Contreras, 2023). The backgrounds of the newest Trustees will be discussed next to distinguish between the progressive liberal arts college of years prior and the future of conservative education in Sarasota as the new regime sets to make an example out of undesirable ‘ideological education.’

The most polarizing of the six new Trustees is Chris Rufo. Rufo is another political ally of Governor DeSantis and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research (Governor, 2023a), which is a conservative think tank. He has authored a book titled *America's Cultural*

*Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything*, framing himself as a figure of opposition to the idea of an education that has been infiltrated by woke leftists. Rufo also led the charge against critical race theory being taught in primary and secondary school (Miller et al., 2023; Schoorman, 2024) and has a history of inflammatory speech, with the target being New College of Florida itself (Contreras, 2023). In a tweet outlining his commitment to rooting out ‘woke anti-Americanism,’ he declared:

“We are now over the walls and ready to transform higher education from within. Under the leadership of Gov. DeSantis, our all-star board will demonstrate that the public universities, which have been corrupted by woke nihilism, can be recaptured, restructured, and reformed.” (Rufo, 2023)

Where academics and scholars would argue the purpose of the university is to foster an autonomous learning environment where students develop the skills and capabilities required of being a valuable member of society, Rufo believes this system is inherently ‘woke’ and that there must be a place where conservative individuals can continue without intellectual stimulation and potential challenges to their worldview. In a New York Times article, Rufo is quoted saying “We want to provide an alternative for conservative families in the state of Florida to say there is a public university that reflects your values” (Goldberg, 2023). The often referred to model for a conservative alternative to higher education is Hillsdale College (Goldberg, 2023; Governor, 2023a). New College Trustees have more than just an ideological affiliation with Hillsdale, however, as one of the new appointees has a significant role with the College.

Matthew Spalding is a professor at Hillsdale college, a small conservative college in Michigan where he also works as the Dean of the government school at their satellite campus in Washington, D.C (Governor, 2023a). He is also a director at the Heritage Foundation in D.C., another conservative think tank that has authored Donald Trump’s 2025 political playbook *Project 2025*. Spalding is joined on the Board by another professor, Charles Kesler, who is also an editor for the conservative publication *Claremont Review of Books* (Contreras, 2023). Jenks, Spier, and Bauerlein round out the appointees and are DeSantis loyalists too, but with less obvious political ties. Along with the remaining seven members of the Board, the new members voted to make Richard Corcoran the new President of New College of Florida. Corcoran is also a conservative republican, having served as the Speaker of the Florida House from 2016 to 2018 (Florida, n.d.).

He was appointed the commissioner of education in Florida by Governor DeSantis in 2018 after leaving the Florida House where he then stayed until 2022. Corcoran was a proven friend and ally of DeSantis and looked to be another yes-person for the Governor who has an abundance of them. From the top to the bottom, New College of Florida has taken the shape the anti-woke, anti-educational freedom model desired by conservatives statewide.

Months after the transformation of the Board of Trustees and the hiring of Corcoran as President, DeSantis commended New College of Florida in a press release full of examples as to how anti-woke legislation is intended to work. The release identifies the following results as successes of the new Board: the termination the gender studies program which made New College of Florida “the first public university to push back on gender indoctrination”; the replacement of “far-left” faculty with others closer aligned to the institution’s mission; and the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) centered positions which saves the institution 200,000 USD annually (Governor, 2023b). DeSantis is quoted in the press release saying, “the New College Board of Trustees is succeeding in its mission to eliminate indoctrination and re-focus higher education on its classical mission” where Corcoran shared the same sentiment, “a true liberal arts education teaches students how to think not what to think. ... New College – like many other colleges recently – began going down a path of ideological indoctrination” (Governor, 2023b). While there have been no other takeovers of public higher education institutions in Florida like the one in New College, the anti-woke model is set and statewide political support for the Governor’s actions has put higher education in the crosshairs.

### **2.3: Florida Higher Education Laws**

This section is dedicated to developing an understanding of the many new laws that now govern Florida public higher education. This legislation has gone through the Florida political process and is now in effect statewide. As these bills are identified for what they are, dissecting the language used in the policy itself is critical to understanding why the usage of vague wording has scholars worried for the future.

## **SB 266**

The first bill to be examined is the most well-known across America and certainly in Florida due not only to the brashness of its contents, but the amount of pushback it received to no avail. SB 266 has changed the trajectory of Florida higher education by stopping the push for progress in its tracks, quickly pivoting from the aftermath of inclusionary practices following the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement in America in the wake of the wrongful death of George Floyd. The most considerable piece of this bill, of which there are many, directly targets and defunds DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) in higher education statewide:

A Florida College System institution, state university, Florida College System institution direct-support organization, or state university direct-support organization may not expend any state or federal funds to promote, support, or maintain any programs or campus activities that: (a) Violate s. 1000.05; or (b) Advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion, or promote or engage in political or social activism, as defined by rules of the State Board of Education and regulations of the Board of Governors. (Senate, 2023a)

Packed into the bill is the elimination of racial, ethnic, and women and gender studies from Florida higher education institution's general education curriculum (Gupton & O'Sullivan, 2024; Senate, 2023a). It also introduces a new civil discourse competency designed around the greatness of Western civilization in order to satisfy core curriculum requirements. The intention here is to "educate university students in the principles, ideals, and institutions of the American political order" (Senate, 2023a). SB 266 does its best to ensure that addressing the injustices against historically marginalized communities in America is a difficult and dangerous task (Gupton & O'Sullivan, 2024). As this section continues to shine a light on the reality of political interference in higher education, it will assist in drawing conclusions from the findings and discussion chapter as to whether or not policies like SB 266 are infringing upon academic autonomy.

## **SB 7044**

SB 7044 introduces the potential for victimization of tenured faculty in this bill. While this bill is labeled as a periodic performance review, which would not be an unreasonable process to implement, both the AAUP and the DeSantis administration have pointed out a clear targeting of faculty that have ties to research in new areas of contention (AAUP, 2023; Governor, 2023b). Academic tenure in America is continuous employment that is granted to faculty members at

higher education institutions for their commitment to academia and the commendable work the individual has done for their field and institution. Tenure is considered an honor and represents the best of higher education; those with tenure can usually only be terminated under extreme circumstances and justifiable cause under academic due process (AAUP, 2023; Gupton & O’Sullivan, 2024). Florida’s SB 7044, however, no longer allows for this to be the case:

The Board of Governors may adopt a regulation requiring each tenured state university faculty member to undergo a comprehensive post-tenure review every 5 years. The board may include other considerations in the regulation, but the regulation must address: 1. Accomplishments and productivity; 2. Assigned duties in research, teaching, and service; 3. Performance metrics, evaluations, and ratings; and 4. Recognition and compensation considerations, as well as improvement plans and consequences for underperformance. (Senate, 2022)

This legislation clears the way to rid the university spaces of tenured professors that would otherwise have not met the threshold for removal from their post. While the wording of the bill suggests a surface level of performance review, researchers who have built careers working in areas of DEI can now be punished for doing so if it is deemed by the architects of the anti-woke movement to be out of favor with the new order of Florida higher education. This claim is supported by the AAUP’s special report on political interference in Florida higher education that highlights New College of Florida’s President, Richard Corcoran, where he is quoted saying: [recommending a faculty member not be awarded tenure based on] “a renewed focus on ensuring the College is moving towards a more traditional liberal arts institution (2023, pp. 5). This quote references the denial of tenure to five faculty members at New College that with external letters of review, would have been granted it in their home state (AAUP, 2023). Ron DeSantis was initially in favor of a post-tenure review that could be called at any time and he publicly announced his desire to give the Board of Trustees and the President of public higher education institutions the power to do (AAUP, 2023). This specific proposal was eventually removed from SB 266 and instead was morphed into what has been passed as a five-year post-tenure review system statewide.

## **SB 846**

SB 846 blocks students from foreign countries of concern from being employed and completing graduate assistant work on research projects for public Florida higher education institutions. For context, foreign country of concern represents:

... the People’s Republic of China, the Russian Federation, the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Republic of Cuba, the Venezuelan regime of Nicolás Maduro, or the Syrian Arab Republic, including any agency of or any other entity under significant control of such foreign country of concern. (Senate, 2023b)

SB 846 calls into question the reason for people coming from the above-mentioned countries to the United States, suspecting citizens of politically adversarial nations of espionage (ACLU, 2024). The bill also includes the withholding of funds from an institution should they enter an agreement with a college or university within the outlined countries of concern (Senate, 2023b). As has been the case throughout this work’s analysis of the DeSantis administration’s language, blanket statements and mass generalizations are shown to be having substantial consequences for individuals in higher education. SB 846 takes an extremely hard stance on academic freedom as well as the freedom to cross borders in search of it. The shutting down of opportunities such as graduate assistantship work has closed the door for millions of students seeking global learning opportunities which enrich the global knowledge space (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007).

## **HB 233**

HB 233 in Florida invites an invasion of the classroom space, whereby students can catch faculty discussing ‘woke’ concepts such as women’s and gender studies, American history, and DEI:

...a student may record video or audio of class lectures for their own personal educational use, in connection with a complaint to the public institution of higher education where the recording was made, or as evidence in, or in preparation for, a criminal or civil proceeding. A recorded lecture may not be published without the consent of the lecturer. (Representatives, 2021)

Faculty in Florida including Erin Ryan and Joe Harrington have gone on record as saying this piece of legislation will do more harm than good. Ryan is a Professor of Law at Florida State University and is also vice chair of the Faculty Senate, while Harrington is a Professor of Physics at the University of Central Florida and chair of the Faculty Senate (Flaherty, 2021). Ryan believes this bill will hinder classroom participation with students knowing at any time the conversation could be recorded and potentially haunt speakers in the future (Flaherty, 2021). Harrington expresses his frustration at the lack of faculty consultation from the legislator’s’ end as the faculty now have another reason to be cautious in the classroom (Flaherty, 2021). HB 233 also requires students to accept the presence of speech that may be derogatory or hateful but is protected by law. It prohibits

higher education institutions from “...shield[ing] students, faculty, or staff at Florida College System institutions from free speech protected under the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, Art. I of the State Constitution, or s.1004.097.72” (Representatives, 2021). Critics of the bill suggest that this is a way to bolster conservative speech on campus that is viewed by legislators as being the minority.

## **2.4: Infringement Upon Academic Freedom and Autonomy?**

This research is intended to provide context to the higher educational state of affairs in Florida. As section 2.3 has outlined, faculty around the state must now consider all the ways their profession has changed: the increased scrutiny coming from above about their research and academic interests, the stealthy recording of their lectures in an attempt to catch them speaking about a topic they by law are prohibited from doing, and an inability to hire the most qualified doctoral research fellows if their country of origin is on the ban list (Senate, 2023b). It is also considerable that the shift to lifetime tenure is at the center of the academic freedom debate, as it provides faculty with the ability to freely carry out their academic duties while being the very people the DeSantis administration wants out of the education system for their “woke” tendencies (AAUP, 2023; AAUP & CHEA, 2012; Governor, 2023b). This final section will use reports from the AAUP and Center for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to acknowledge the severity of the political overstep into the higher education sphere, giving way to the Findings chapter where the data collected will support the main argument of the project, being that there has been a significant limitation of institutional autonomy in Florida and that the government structures and powers at play in the state capital make for this to be a deeply-rooted legislation issue that is more than just political theater.

### **Institutional Academic Freedom and Autonomy**

*The success of American higher education . . . is explained in good measure by the observance of academic freedom. This freedom is manifested institutionally as colleges and universities seek to conduct their educational missions without inappropriate influence from external centers of power—public and private.*  
(AAUP & CHEA, 2012, pp. 1)

In his work outlining modern imperatives of higher education with the priorities of history, Cain (2023) invokes the words of the elite American professors that formed the AAUP over 100 years ago. Before the end of the AAUP’s first year, these professors established academic freedom as a core goal for their organization and higher education nationwide. They were aware of the concept

of state control over public institutions of higher education, quoted saying: “where the university is dependent for funds upon legislative favor, it has sometimes happened that the conduct of the institution has been affected by political considerations” (AAUP, 1915). Cain (2023) uses this to then say that universities must be free to pursue knowledge that is unpopular to the masses and furthers his point with the idea that society benefits as whole from academic freedom, not just the individual researcher. Cain then transitions to the issue of institutional autonomy which is paramount to the research I have been conducting. Institutional autonomy in this case, then, relates to the idea of academic freedom where it is the right of individual faculty members of an institution to be shielded from undue restrictions related to their work. It is an institution’s freedom from “excessive outside influences, be they governmental, denominational, or otherwise” that is a key factor in establishing institutional autonomy (Cain, 2023, pp. 3). The AAUP’s 2023 special report on political interference in Florida as it pertains to academic freedom and institutional autonomy is the strongest condemnation of the DeSantis administration and will be explored next.

With institutional autonomy and academic freedom in the balance, the AAUP concluded in their special report that higher education in Florida faces a political and ideological assault that is unlike anything before seen in the United States (AAUP, 2023). The report acknowledges that shared governance throughout the state university system has been compromised by political interference as legislators and the boards approved by them target tenure and institution curricula (AAUP, 2023). There is an emphasis on the human toll of these moves by the DeSantis administration in this report and in others, as early year academics do not see Florida as a place to grow and feel comfortable and proud of the work they do (Ecarma, 2023). This then invites a concern over job security and safety in a time where even tenured professors who have been honored with such distinction can be seen as an ideological enemy of the state and thus marked as terminable. It is of course not the legislators or ideologues who’ve put higher education in their sights that are the ones contributing to academia and the creation and distribution of knowledge; it is the researchers and faculty who must maneuver new legislation that sets Florida back in time in the name of patriotism.

Not only did Florida republicans make their intentions clear on the state of higher education within their border by openly disparaging institutions and faculty for being vessels of woke culture, but they also implemented massive changes to the structure of higher education and how state

institutions must operate. DeSantis appointee and political yes-man Chris Rufo used military language to describe the way the new regime at New College of Florida will tackle ‘woke indoctrination of students’, indicating that this is a plan that is working and has goals and objectives that need to be met (Contreras, 2023). In the next chapter, I will share the stories of eight faculty from across Florida higher education and shed more light on the experiences of individuals that now face the task of navigating this new political and educational landscape.

## Chapter 3: The Findings

This project set out to provide a better understanding of institutional autonomy in Florida and to uncover whether the DeSantis administration is putting on a political performance that suggests the policies are short term, or if the legislative attack against ‘woke’ higher education is potentially here to stay. Chapter 3 will tell the lived experiences of eight faculty members who are employed by public higher education institutions within the state university system. Out of respect for their job security and future career and research prospects, all participants will remain anonymous throughout the Findings and Discussion chapters and will be recalled via their designation of a number 1-8. This is a necessary step to take as both the legislation, and the New College of Florida case examined in Chapter 2 highlight the collective Boards’ desire to remove professors from their post that may not align with the mission of the institution and new state curriculum guidelines. The data collected during this research has been identified and organized into three main recurring themes of the interview process that help provide context and answers to the research questions: a chilling effect as a result of political surveillance, the relationship between tenure and working in the Florida higher education system, and the issue of academic autonomy. I will present these findings in the chapter’s subsections. This chapter will also provide additional insight into the life of faculty during a tumultuous time in Florida and bring perspective to the individuals treated like pawns in a political game. The idea to conduct this research came from an interest in political systems and how they interact with major educational institutions, how the educational institutions manage their position between government and faculty, and the noise Ron DeSantis was making throughout his higher education reformation. I have learned a lot during this process whether it was in conversation with experts in higher education or making a critical analysis of legislation and connecting my understanding to literature in the field and the subsequent connection to reality.

The findings presented in this research support the argument that institutional autonomy is being threatened by the encroachment of Florida state government actors onto higher education. Furthermore, both the literature and the data suggest that DeSantis’ dominance in the higher education space may continue for a prolonged period of time because of the political capital that he has accrued in a conservative state with republican majorities in all major legislative and administrative positions. The data collected focuses on four main points and introduces two other areas of concern that I found interesting in the field. As outlined in the Methodology chapter, a

qualitative analysis of the research data using the social constructionism paradigm puts the stories of the faculty members in the context of reality as people have built it. Their stories come as a byproduct of the political machine that for the last three decades has established an unchallengeable power within the state of Florida where the DeSantis administration has now been emboldened to crush his ideological enemies (Ballotpedia, 2024b). By targeting institutions of higher education, these attacks on civil liberties such as an individual's right to an education unimpeded by the government, as well as an educator and researcher's right to carry out their business without external interference have hindered both the desire to work and study in the state of Florida for fear of retaliation of some kind (AAUP, 1915, 2023). It is of course this fear of retaliation that stays on the minds of academics in Florida, so much so that it became an unprepared-for major theme that arose in my interviews and is now vital to the construction of my arguments.

### **3.1: A Chilling Effect in Florida Sun**

Going into the interview process knowing what I knew about Florida higher education from the news media and listening to the public disparagement of inclusive ideology by the DeSantis administration, I was expecting to hear at least some mention of a chilling effect presiding over the general mood of the interviewees. I had no intention of asking the faculty members for their thoughts about this in the interview preparation, but as it continued to come up in every other conversation, I found it important to discuss in greater detail what this means for the everyday actions of this study's participants and for faculty across Florida. What I found was the recurring idea that the people on the ground in Florida higher education can feel a sense of surveillance that makes going about their business more difficult if not impossible. A chilling effect is "a discouraging or deterring effect on the behavior of an individual or group, esp. the inhibition of the exercise of a constitutional right, such as freedom of speech, through fear of legal action" (Dictionary, 2023a). In the case of Florida, as has been discussed in the policy sections of Chapter 2, the new order of decorum in the classroom requires faculty to be aware of what they say and do or risk violation of SB 266 and be held liable for it as a result of HB 233. I was, however, shocked by the quickness with which I was met with the first mention of a chilling effect by Participant 1. Three minutes into the interview, Participant 1 is quoted saying: "but you know, the bottom line is that there's an obvious chilling effect... there's a definite sort of chilling effect, and you can see it

in the numbers and the paper” as we discussed the work of Claude Steele’s *Whistling Vivaldi* (2011) and the feeling of inner anxiousness and fear that an individual feels when intimidation tactics from the government are being applied.

Of the eight interviews conducted, five faculty members discussed a chilling effect lingering around higher education, all of which came unprompted. As I had my list of prioritized conversation topics, I became more interested in the interviewees bringing it up on their own where I would then dig deeper to find how this affects the individual both emotionally and at work. I find the notion that five out of the eight academics mentioning an ominous sense of fear of retaliation from a higher authority remarkable for its now evident presence in their everyday lives. In our discussions about institutional autonomy and the staying power of politically motivated legislation, the fact that outsider influence was as prevalent during the conversations is a significant contribution to the study as it establishes a mood and culture of hesitancy and confusion. This next quote touches on both the now widespread fearmongering of DeSantis and his appointees, but also the depth of the political system above the faculty that illustrates what is against them:

[The] bad news is, as you know, when DeSantis... started attacking DEI personally and then, you know, legislatively, everyone was nervous and still is nervous. With that bill DeSantis, you know, and the Board of Governors has truly created a culture of fear within the university, and that touches everything. (Participant 8)

Here, Participant 8 describes this culture of fear as touching everything that goes on at the university. There is also an important distinction made in the quote where Participant 8 mentions a nervousness that was not only around when DeSantis began attacking DEI after the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020, but that it is still there today, four years later. This is a sign of deeper roots of ‘anti-wokeness’ being across the state and would prove an effective way to challenge institutional autonomy and academic freedom (AAUP & CHEA, 2012; Gupton & O’Sullivan, 2024). These ideas can be traced back to Sections 2.1 and 2.3 where the increased role of politics in higher education is discussed in relation to institutional autonomy. I reiterate a section of my argument that Florida’s legislative trifecta and supermajority has a direct impact on the ability of a state higher education institution to function. Below, Participant 7 also details their experience with DeSantis’ regime:

So we're accustomed to having... political watchdogs, the Board of Governors, the board of trustees, the governor himself... Watching what we're doing, paying attention to what we're doing and we do have to be answerable to those entities... passing legislation to dictate the way those of us in higher Ed do our jobs, they have become... very much involved in not just the broad strokes, but in the day-to-day operations. (Participant 7)

Participants 3 and 5 share the same sentiment as described in the snippet from Participant 7 and I's conversation. They also feel that the Governor's political presence on campus has become 'intrusive' and that working in higher education right now is like "having a target on our back." I'd also like to address what the word "fear" felt like to me as a researcher when observing the mood during the interviews I was conducting. This was not a fear that one would experience when watching a horror film where an individual is in physical danger, but rather, a sense of fear that describes a knowledge of impending troubles. These faculty members have seen the development of legislation such as SB 266 and SB 7044 and see the current political state of Tallahassee and the subsequent Board appointees that have signed off it as an issue that can get worse and continue to delegitimize 'contentious' topics like gender, race, and history. There is also a fear of the inevitability that the Board of Governors and the Boards of Trustees will continue to fall in line with DeSantis' wishes and do a disservice to the inherent responsibilities of their role. Here, Participant 5 justifies this thought when discussing the disfunction that comes with a Board that wants to be involved in more business than it should be:

That's critical and I don't see a lot of that happening because when they are coached on what their role is, which is essentially policy, it's not management of the institution, it's policy governance at that level, then they shouldn't be questioning at all why they don't approve promotion and tenure decisions, why they don't approve of a basic operational things that occur within a college or university, they should be approving general broad policies. Ok, but sadly many of them don't know that. Or they fall...They see that sort of micromanaging that happens among the elected officials and politicians, and so they kind-of fall into that. (Participant 5)

The primary point in this quote paints the Board members as having a desire to be more involved where, in the eyes of Participant 5, they have no right to be. This derives from the segment presented in section 2.4 where government overreach of various levels interferes with both an institution and faculty member's ability to conduct their research unabated by external factors (Cain, 2023; Schoorman, 2024). Insofar as government overreach is concerned, this final quote of the section introduces political momentum into the great higher education picture:

And so, he was feeling it, so to speak, and in my [number of] years, I've never witnessed what happened beginning in the 2023 legislative session, in that the entire time that I've been here, both branches of our legislature and the governor's mansion were occupied by Republicans; But he won [the 2022 gubernatorial election] in a landslide, and there's a bunch of factors on the political side. I'm not going to get into what exactly happened, but he won by a large margin and knew he was going to challenge Trump [for the 2024 presidential nomination]. (Participant 2)

Political momentum in America is one of the most powerful things a political figure can possess at any time in their career. It instills in them a new sense of confidence and gives them a support they may not have had before. The issue remains that political momentum wears off quite easily in the United States as numerous examples illustrate this point; as recently as August 2024, the boost that Kamala Harris received in weeks following President Joe Biden's decision to drop out of the race flipped the election on its head. Polls in July of 2024 had President Biden down six points to Donald Trump following Biden's poor debate performance earlier that month. After the Democratic National Convention in August 2024, national polls show Harris as the frontrunner with anywhere between one and four points to the better of Trump (Rubin, 2024). Ron DeSantis was experiencing something of the same but at a state level. At this level, though, as participant 2 mentioned, DeSantis was able to use two things to his advantage. One being his new national political identity and two, of course, being his legislative bypass mechanism in the form of unchecked political power.

### **3.2: Tenure: Is it a Factor?**

*The way that post-tenure review piece is worded is that they can, they can do whatever they want and there is basically no right of appeal. (Participant 5)*

My conversations pertaining to tenure in Florida led me to make an important distinction about the age and position of this study's participants and also draw from one interesting dynamic between faculty and institution. There is, first, the difference in opinion between tenured and non-tenured faculty members about the way they would conduct themselves professionally. The second, which happens to be less of a recurring theme and more of a unique yet generalizable circumstance, is an instance in which an institution stakes its position silently and leaves the faculty members to deal for themselves. There are connections that will be made between sections 3.1 and 3.2 that illustrate how these issues are linked and thus strengthen the arguments of this paper.

Tenure among Florida higher education faculty is both a saving grace and an automatic political target. All interviewees that had secured tenure felt comfortable enough to do their work but acknowledged the implications of stepping too far out of line. Of those that had worked as researchers or educators elsewhere in America before going to Florida, there was a sense of ‘not being in Kansas anymore’, as the late great Judy Garland would say. Had this study’s participants not already obtained tenure before post-tenure review became law in Florida, the majority of them said they would reconsider staying in the state and would recommend that young academics at least consider other offers outside of the sunshine state to preserve their peace and individual autonomy. This is a stunning admission of no confidence that does not necessarily condemn the university to a state of disfunction, but it places the perspective of academics in the university system as one of being weary of the future. To begin, though, one quotation each from Participants 4 and 5 will quell the idea that there is widespread panic for all higher education faculty members. The data collected in this study suggests that older faculty who have secured tenure already and are in the later stages of their career feel as though they have less to lose:

I think well, no, I haven't worried about my job security. I'm a fully tenured professor and have been for years and am retiring next month anyway, so there's not much (Participant 4)

I'm on the backside of my career. I'm glad I'm a tenured full. Because there are things I can say that non tenured [faculty cannot]. But that's the case whether it was DeSantis' administration or not, you know, whether fear is real or perceived... if it is perceived, in my opinion it is real. (Participant 5)

While it is understandable that a late-career professor would be less concerned with facing repercussions for violating Florida’s new education laws, participant 5 in particular includes a loaded statement with their second sentence that is worth unpacking. To first tie sections 3.1 and 3.2 together, there is another mention of a perception of fear by the university faculty in Florida. Participant 5 acknowledges the boundaries that now exist for lesser privileged faculty members and identifies that as long as there exists a culture of fear, whether it possess its authority from public opinion or government backing, there too exists a hindrance to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. However, the mention of whether or not it is DeSantis’ administration in charge invites the idea that politically motivated legislation can be term-less, meaning that given the right circumstances, such as a legislative supermajority, even ideological victories can have staying power that negatively influences individuals and academic freedom.

### 3.2.1: To Stay or To Go?

This quote from Participant 3 illustrates the reality of being tenure-tracked in Florida whose research topics have been banned or are now highly contentious and polarized. By the time of our interview, participant 3 had decided to leave their position as a faculty member of a Florida higher education institution and instead field offers from other universities around the United States. Interestingly, participant 3 described the recruitment strategy of other U.S. universities as targeting earlier-career academics in Florida and not only offering to pay “more than sunshine” (Participant 5) but emphasizing their commitment to furthering the reach of the incoming hire’s scholarship, unlike what they may be facing in Florida. See what participant 3 had to say here:

And as I mentioned you before we started the interview, I’m about to leave, so that gives me maybe a few more degrees of freedom to talk pretty openly than maybe some others might feel; I had framed [my work] around Trump and that we need to have folks who understand checks and balances in the system and then right as I started publishing more, I’m seeing some of the art [displays] that are going up here [on campus] and that things were more and more critical of the governor and of the administration that was put in place by the governor. Right, well, then they stopped pushing my... publishing my scholarship. And then I think really they’ve just kind of killed that stuff [department social media posts amplifying politically contentious academia] entirely. (Participant 3)

I want to try and highlight the positives of coming to [our university] and not focus so much on politics because we hope the politics go away. But, if the politics were to stay, I see a great exodus of certain groups of faculty members happening. If not, you know, I think the hope is that the politics, the pendulum will swing back somehow. (Participant 6)

This evidence is in line with what the DeSantis administration and Board of Trustees at New College of Florida set out to do, rid the university space of so-called “left-wing lunatics” with their targeted legislative approach. What participant 3 had been experiencing up until their decision to leave the Florida academic space is the result of an ideological censorship campaign that spreads far beyond the classroom. Participant 3 expressed their desire to be a valued member of the faculty at their university and the emotion with which this sentiment was conveyed told me as the observer that coming to this decision took time. There became a sense of hopelessness for their career prospects and regardless of the work they had done or the time they had spent trying to make things work in Florida, the message had been received that they were not welcome, and it was time to move on. Participant 6 on the other hand can see a light at the end of the tunnel, given of course, quite the political shift that is sure to be put to the test on Election Day 2024 in America.

Nonetheless, it is a less somber tone in the face of drastic changes to their way of life in such a short span of time. Participant 6 relayed a sense of hope while also acknowledging the reality of continued ideological warfare against inclusive research and education curriculum and those who conduct it.

### **3.3: Academic Autonomy and Beyond**

*“I’m an optimist, otherwise we will no longer be a democracy... So, I do not believe in Florida. We are a democracy, and I believe that’s been taken away from us.*

(Participant 5)

The success of a higher education institution is contingent upon the performance of its administration, its faculty, and its students. Individuals perform best under ideal circumstances and would prefer to be treated with respect and appreciation where they are. When people begin to lose faith in whatever process they’re a part of, it becomes increasingly harder for them to commit to accomplishing their responsibilities the way they are capable of. All eight of this study’s participants mentioned in one way or another the gradual shift away from the days of true academic freedom. Participants 2 and 6 stated that even though they personally have not felt pressure from the university or any government crackdowns, they do know friends or co-workers that have been affected by them to varying degrees that range from the changing of a syllabus to the denial of a research grant. Participant 3 had decided that, for them, the feeling of academic freedom was gone and that they could no longer see any benefit to staying in Florida with seemingly better opportunities presented to them everywhere else in the United States. It is clear that academia in Florida is not in the same place it was four years ago, but the intention of this research is to determine the extent to which that is the case. In this final section, two more quotes from participants in this study display the emotion and the thought process from different perspectives in academia but facing the same issue:

Uh, you know, you think twice about what you put on yourself as you think twice about what you write. I have doctoral students... I tell them to think twice about the topics that they pick... some of them work in the state system, and although they're very curious about the what's happening in the state system, it might affect their job security. They [doctorate students] want the doctorate to serve not a faculty career, but an administrative career, and so that affects their dissertation choices. And we have to have a hard talk, the students and I, about whether [they] want to assume the risk. (Participant 1)

People work in academia for academic freedom, right? And you take less salary, but then you have more autonomy and more, you know, control over your work. And now it's. It's like you have less employment security. You're not unionized. We're not going to pay you more, right? (Participant 3)

Participant 1 has now not only themselves to look out for, but also the students they must guide through this tumultuous time where confusion reigns supreme and the state knows best. This research was primarily concerned with the autonomy of faculty and the institutions adjusting to new legislation, but participant 1 contributes an important consideration that ought to be made for future research into the lives of students. When the statistics related to this phenomenon are released, there will be many other doors opened into the effects of student life at public universities in Florida. To draw from the opening quote of this section, Participant 5 has declared that democracy has been taken away from those in Florida, which is a strong rebuke of the actions of the Florida governor. Democracy is the lynchpin of the American experiment, and for the notion of its existence in Florida to be contested by the very individuals that work and serve the public as creators and distributors of knowledge brings about legitimate questions about the presence of autonomy on campus. The findings in this chapter relate to the literature used in Chapter 2 in many regards, the details of which can be found in the following Chapter 4 where links between the data and the literature will present a completed argument.

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusions

*And we have had talks about what they're naturally curious about, but these topics can get them in trouble. (Participant 1)*

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have constructed an argument with the existing literature on higher education in Florida and the findings of my conducted research that provides the reader with an opportunity to take a position on. I will now address the first research question and how the analyzed literature and the findings of this research contribute to a coherent argument about state political interference in the higher educational process. *How autonomous is higher education in Florida amidst recent [2020's] policy changes?* To answer this question, I first draw from Section 2.1 and 3.1 to address both Governor DeSantis' mission with regard to higher education and his ability to take meaningful action. Per (Ballotpedia, 2024b, 2024c), DeSantis' fully packed right-wing legislative body gives him the power to push not only legislation through the halls of the state congress, but also Board appointments which act as political yes-people in the higher educational decision-making space (Participant 2). The Board appointments, of which the majority are wealthy outsiders and political allies of Governor DeSantis (Participant 5), have taken it upon themselves to publicly call into question the legitimacy of higher education due to its propensity to include “woke” ideology in the curriculum (Diaz Jr., 2023; Goldberg, 2023; Rufo, 2023). This study has come to understand “woke” ideology as being inclusive in nature with roots in gender studies, history, and race (Gupton & O’Sullivan, 2024; Schoorman, 2024). In Section 2.4, the AAUP’s (2023) Special Report on higher education in Florida also found political interference in relation to academic freedom in public universities as the participants in this study contributed more nuance to the calls of anti-democratic practices being implemented in Florida. The pursuit of the AAUP in 1915 for academic freedom and autonomy in public universities has been halted in the sunshine state, where politically motivated firings of academics and ideological warfare prevents faculty members from conducting research in areas of study that need it serve as lead pieces of evidence for this work’s inquiry.

Sections 3.2.1 and 3.3 elaborate on the idea that higher education has lost its autonomy to political overseers in a more human way than by labeling people as government officials or faculty. As is of the utmost importance with qualitative research, giving the participants in the study a voice helps elicit more compassion out of those who witness. These are individuals who are passionate

about their work and what they can contribute to the overall body of work in their field, but their opportunity to do so in Florida is dwindling (AAUP, 2023). Participant 3 in section 3.3 asks rhetorical questions of what academics want in their search for employment and opportunity, which on top of respect for their person, includes only the ability to achieve their goals and to have the support of those facilitating their chance to do so. Participant 6 sees the current political situation as a dire situation where, if it were to continue as it is with DeSantis' legislative crackdown, they could see it pushing people out of their jobs and more than likely out of the state. The tradeoff for being an academic that prioritizes social justice and progress is an inability to do so at all.

*Does the implementation of these policies indicate a broader transformation of higher education in the state and how much of it is political theater?* The answer to this question is where this research contributes to the one of many gaps in this brand-new phenomenon in American higher education. Where many of the participants in this study commented on DeSantis' rise to real power in Florida with his attack on "woke" ideology, they also failed to definitively say that they see an end to the new lockdown on higher education coming anytime soon. Though their wishful thinking may have them in a more positive state of mind, they also acknowledged that this has now become a deeper systemic issue rooted in both a political power grab, but also legitimate power capable of relocating professors and researchers alike. Sections 2.2 and 2.3 outline the thought process for developing an answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph. Ron DeSantis has used his war on "woke" to score substantial legislative victories as well as cultural ones (Governor, 2023b). The substantial legislative victories, unlike public opinion, do not change overnight and would require a major shift in the political landscape of the state in order to not only stop the passing of more legislation like those outlined in Section 2.4, but also overturn the ones that the state congress has already enacted. This is why DeSantis' ability to win the culture war has resulted in far more than a catchy slogan; the highly polarized right-wing of American politics combined with the recent political history of Florida suggests that the state has undergone a significant transformation that requires a massive political and cultural shift to undo (Ballotpedia, 2024b; Klas, 2022).

## **Suggestions and Conclusions**

I will now propose suggestions for further research that I found to be critical areas of study in order to understand more about DeSantis' long-term plan for higher education in Florida. I will also

reflect on important realizations made during this research process and how they contributed to the final product.

There exist countless quantitative studies to be conducted in Florida in relation to the student bodies of state public universities. What I found during this research is that the majority of presented literature is focused on the impact that the DeSantis administration's recent moves have had on faculty members and professionals in higher education. The student body was vital to the participants of this study's stories as they worked with them and guided them through their educational journey. My research did not have the time or resources to examine students' desire to stay in the state if their degree program has been targeted by legislation or if their identity has been challenged by the government, whether or not that is a factor in a student's decision to stay or go. I was also made aware of the many legal challenges that sweeping legislation like the bills being passed in Florida can face and are facing today, again in regards to international students' rights like the ban on graduate research fellowships in SB 846 (Senate, 2023b)

The most influential chapter and section for me in this research experience is 2.1. This section grew in importance as I began to formulate a coherent argument and began to understand the political implications of the state legislature being at the will of the Governor. My background in political science allowed me to grapple with the inherent risks of political power and a poignant message, and how these things can shape the way generations experience a certain phenomenon. Chapter and section 2.2 served as another vital part of the building of my argument as it allowed for me to understand that DeSantis' target is a moving one, thus, giving him and his allies the legitimacy to push for more once they've established dominance over one aspect of it.

Higher education is the place where individuals are best equipped to tackle the world's biggest questions and connect with the existence of knowledge as it does around us. It is a place where curiosity is the beginning of a quest for solutions to societal ailments and where people can engage with difficult topics freely in the hope that one day they aren't so difficult. Referencing the quote from Participant 1 at the onset of this chapter, this curiosity has been curtailed by Ron DeSantis' legislative agenda and the future of higher education in Florida is in a battle for its own autonomy. In closing, I knew that I myself as a human-being view the world as a place where everyone is valuable for whatever they bring to the table. It is my desire as a lifelong learner to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to do so and has the freedom to explore areas that may be difficult

for some but necessary for all. I will continue to advocate for academic autonomy and against educational interference in the hopes that one day there will be no barriers to an individual's pursuit of knowledge.

## References

- @RonFilipkowski. (2023). *Six 'wokes' in 19 seconds today at the Moms for Liberty conference. He's really fighting the woke.* <https://x.com/RonFilipkowski/status/1674780209390960661>
- AAUP. (1915). Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure. *Academe*, 2012(2011).
- AAUP. (2023). *Report of a Special Committee: Political Interference and Academic Freedom in Florida's Public Higher Education System.* <https://www.aaup.org/report/report-special-committee-political-interference-and-academic-freedom-florida%E2%80%99s-public-higher>
- AAUP, & CHEA. (2012). Accreditation and Academic Freedom. *Center for Higher Education Accreditation.* <https://www.chea.org/sites/default/files/other-content/AAUP-CHEA%20-%20FINAL.pdf>
- ACLU. (2024). *International Students and Professor Sue Florida Over Unconstitutional and Discriminatory Law Blocking Them from Academic Labs.* <https://www.aclufl.org/en/press-releases/international-students-and-professor-sue-florida-over-unconstitutional-and>
- Alharahsheh, H. H., & Pius, A. (2020). A review of key paradigms: Positivism VS interpretivism. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(3), 39-43.
- Alvesson, M., Hardy, C., & Harley, B. (2008). Reflecting on reflexivity: Reflexive textual practices in organization and management theory. *Journal of management studies*, 45(3), 480-501.
- Andrews, T. (2012). What is social constructionism? *Grounded theory review*, 11(1).
- Ballotpedia. (2024a). *Florida Commissioner of Education.* [https://ballotpedia.org/Florida\\_Commissioner\\_of\\_Education](https://ballotpedia.org/Florida_Commissioner_of_Education)
- Ballotpedia. (2024b). *Party control of Florida state government.* [https://ballotpedia.org/Party\\_control\\_of\\_Florida\\_state\\_government](https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Florida_state_government)
- Ballotpedia. (2024c). *Supermajority.* <https://ballotpedia.org/Supermajority>
- Basit, T. (2003). Manual or electronic? The role of coding in qualitative data analysis. *Educational research*, 45(2), 143-154.
- Bergen, N., & Labonté, R. (2020). "Everything is perfect, and we have no problems": detecting and limiting social desirability bias in qualitative research. *Qualitative health research*, 30(5), 783-792.
- Berger, P., & Luckmann, T. (2016). The social construction of reality. In *Social theory re-wired* (pp. 110-122). Routledge.
- Biggam, J. (2018). *EBOOK: Succeeding with your Master's Dissertation: A Step-by-Step Handbook: Step-by-step Handbook.* McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Bouchrika, I. (2024). *How to Write Research Methodology in 2024: Overview, Tips, and Techniques.* <https://research.com/research/how-to-write-research-methodology>

- Burningham, K., & Cooper, G. (1999). Being constructive: Social constructionism and the environment. *Sociology*, 33(2), 296-316.
- Cain, T. R. (2023). Accreditation, Academic Freedom, and Institutional Autonomy: Historical Precedents and Modern Imperatives.
- Callon, M., & Law, J. (1986). Power, action and belief: a new sociology of knowledge? *The Science Studies Reader*. Londres: Routledge, 196-223.
- Campbell, S., Greenwood, M., Prior, S., Shearer, T., Walkem, K., Young, S., Bywaters, D., & Walker, K. (2020). Purposive sampling: complex or simple? Research case examples. *Journal of research in Nursing*, 25(8), 652-661.
- Chandra, Y., & Shang, L. (2019). Inductive Coding. In Y. Chandra & L. Shang (Eds.), *Qualitative Research Using R: A Systematic Approach* (pp. 91-106). Springer Nature Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3170-1\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-3170-1_8)
- Contreras, J. (2023). 'Hostile takeover': the tiny Florida university targeted by Ron DeSantis. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/29/ron-desantis-florida-university-new-college-woke-war>
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining Validity in Qualitative Inquiry. *Theory into practice*, 39(3), 124-130. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2)
- Crotty, M. J. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process.
- DeSantis, R. (2023). Stump Speech. In. Peoria, Illinois.
- Diaz Jr., M. [@CommMannyDiazJr]. (2023, December 8th, 2023). *Sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course...* [Tweet]. <https://x.com/CommMannyDiazJr/status/1733192839100568018>
- Dictionary, O. E. (2023a). chilling effect | chiling effect, n. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- Dictionary, O. E. (2023b). woke, adj.<sup>2</sup>, sense 2. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- Dictionary, O. E. (2023c). wokeism, n. In *Oxford English Dictionary*.
- Dilley, P. (2000). Conducting successful interviews: Tips for intrepid research. *Theory into practice*, 39(3), 131-137.
- Ecarma, C. (2023). I can't teach like this": Florida's education brain drain is hitting public schools hard. *Vanity Fair*.
- Emerson, R. W. (2015). Convenience sampling, random sampling, and snowball sampling: How does sampling affect the validity of research? *Journal of visual impairment & blindness*, 109(2), 164-168.
- Enders, J., De Boer, H., & Weyer, E. (2013). Regulatory autonomy and performance: The reform of higher education re-visited. *Higher education*, 65, 5-23.
- Fereday, J., & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 5(1), 80-92.
- Ferrero-Ferrero, I., Fernández-Izquierdo, M. Á., Muñoz-Torres, M. J., & Bellés-Colomer, L. (2018). Stakeholder engagement in sustainability reporting in higher education: An

- analysis of key internal stakeholders' expectations. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 19(2), 313-336.
- Fish, S. (1990). How to recognize a poem when you see one' Ways of Reading: An Anthology for Writers 2 nd edn, eds. D. Bartholomae & A. Petrosky. In: Bedford Books of St Martin's Press, Boston.
- Flaherty, C. (2021). *Lights, Camera, Teach?* <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/04/16/florida-poised-pass-bill-allowing-students-record-classes>
- Florida, N. C. o. (n.d.). *Office of the President*. <https://www.ncf.edu/departments/office-of-the-president/>
- Florida, S. U. S. o. (2024a). *Promoting Excellence in Teaching, Research, and Public Service*. <https://www.flbog.edu/board/members/>.
- Florida, S. U. S. o. (2024b). *Trustee Appointments & Development*. <https://www.flbog.edu/trustees/trustee-appointments-development/>
- Foucault, M., & Sheridan, A. (2020). *Discipline and punish the birth of the prison*. Penguin Books.
- Franz, M. M. (2018). Targeting campaign messages: Good for campaigns but bad for America? In *New directions in media and politics* (pp. 174-198). Routledge.
- Goldberg, M. (2023). *DeSantis Allies Plot the Hostile Takeover of a Liberal College*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/opinion/chris-rufo-florida-ron-desantis.html>
- Gorton, W. A. (2016). Manipulating citizens: How political campaigns' use of behavioral social science harms democracy. *New Political Science*, 38(1), 61-80.
- Governor, O. o. t. (2023a). *Governor Ron DeSantis Appoints Six to the New College of Florida Board of Trustees* <https://www.flgov.com/2023/01/06/governor-ron-desantis-appoints-six-to-the-new-college-of-florida-board-of-trustees/>
- Governor, O. o. t. (2023b). *Governor Ron DeSantis Commends New College of Florida's Transformation under Newly Appointed Board of Trustees* <https://www.flgov.com/2023/08/18/governor-ron-desantis-commends-new-college-of-floridas-transformation-under-newly-appointed-board-of-trustees/>
- Order Granting in Part and Denying in Part Motions for Preliminary Injunction, (2022). <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/23310542/doc-044-order-granting-mot-for-prelim-inj.pdf>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2(163-194), 105.
- Gupton, J. T., & O'Sullivan, A. (2024). Critically framing Florida's anti-Woke education reform movement. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2024.2376717>
- Harré, R. (1986). *The social construction of emotions*. Basil Blackwell.
- Hart, S. L. (1971). Axiology--Theory of Values. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 32(1), 29-41. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2105883>

- Hersh, E. D., & Schaffner, B. F. (2013). Targeted campaign appeals and the value of ambiguity. *The Journal of Politics*, 75(2), 520-534.
- Killam, L. (2013). *Research terminology simplified: Paradigms, axiology, ontology, epistemology and methodology*. Laura Killam.
- Klas, M. E. (2022). *Red wave sweeps in supermajorities in Florida Legislature*. <https://www.miamiherald.com/news/politics-government/election/article268242182.html>
- Knott, E., Rao, A. H., Summers, K., & Teeger, C. (2022). Interviews in the social sciences. *Nature Reviews Methods Primers*, 2(1), 73.
- Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. sage.
- Layzell, D. T. (2007). State higher education funding models: An assessment of current and emerging approaches. *Journal of Education Finance*, 1-19.
- Littig, B. (2009). Interviewing the elite—interviewing experts: is there a difference? In *Interviewing experts* (pp. 98-113). Springer.
- Luo, L., & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Semistructured interviews. *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science*, 232.
- Maassen, P., Gornitzka, Å., & Fumasoli, T. (2017). University reform and institutional autonomy: A framework for analysing the living autonomy. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 71(3), 239-250. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12129>
- MacDonald, S. (1986). *Research methods handbook*. Cles.
- Majid, M. A. A., Othman, M., Mohamad, S. F., Lim, S. A. H., & Yusof, A. (2017). Piloting for interviews in qualitative research: Operationalization and lessons learnt. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 7(4), 1073-1080.
- Malmqvist, J., Hellberg, K., Möllås, G., Rose, R., & Shevlin, M. (2019). Conducting the pilot study: A neglected part of the research process? Methodological findings supporting the importance of piloting in qualitative research studies. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 18, 1609406919878341.
- Marginson, S., & Van der Wende, M. (2007). Globalisation and higher education.
- Marshall, S. J., & Marshall, S. J. (2018). Internal and external stakeholders in higher education. *Shaping the University of the Future: Using technology to catalyse change in university learning and teaching*, 77-102.
- McLendon, M. K., Hearn, J. C., & Mokher, C. G. (2009). Partisans, professionals, and power: The role of political factors in state higher education funding. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 80(6), 686-713.
- Miller, V., Fernandez, F., & Hutchens, N. H. (2023). The race to ban race: Legal and critical arguments against state legislation to ban critical race theory in higher education. *Mo. L. Rev.*, 88, 61.
- O'Neill, A. (2024). *Geography of the United States - Statistics & Facts (statista)*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/9782/geography-of-the-united-states/#topicOverview>

- Palfreyman, D., & Tapper, T. (2012). What is an 'Elite' or 'Leading global' University? In *Structuring Mass Higher Education* (pp. 203-217). Routledge.
- Parker, C., Scott, S., & Geddes, A. (2019). Snowball sampling. *SAGE research methods foundations*.
- PEN, A. (2023). New Report: Book Bans Spike by 33% Over Last School Year. In: September.
- Perera, K. (2021). Interviewing academic elites: A discourse analysis of shifting power relations. *Qualitative Research*, 21(2), 215-233.
- Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity—one's own. *Educational researcher*, 17(7), 17-21.
- Phillips, M. J. (2023). Towards a social constructionist, criticalist, Foucauldian-informed qualitative research approach: Opportunities and challenges. *SN Social Sciences*, 3(10), 175. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00774-9>
- Qu, S. Q., & Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative research in accounting & management*, 8(3), 238-264.
- Representatives, F. S. H. o. (2021). *HB 233: Postsecondary Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2021/233/BillText/er/PDF>
- Rogers, A. M., & Gregston, M. (2023). Woke: The New Four-Letter Word. *Employee Relations Law Journal*, 49(3), 11-14.
- Roulston, K., & Choi, M. (2018). Qualitative interviews. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*, 233-249.
- Rubin, A. (2024). *Harris gains edge on Trump in polls following DNC*. <https://www.axios.com/2024/08/30/kamala-harris-poll-support-trump>
- Rufo, C. [@realchrisrufo]. (2023). *We are now over the walls and ready to transform higher education from within. Under the leadership of Gov. DeSantis, our all-star board will demonstrate that the public universities, which have been corrupted by woke nihilism, can be recaptured, restructured, and reformed*. <https://x.com/realchrisrufo/status/1611407924768956417?lang=en>
- Sampson, H. (2004). Navigating the waves: The usefulness of a pilot in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 4(3), 383-402.
- Sav, G. T. (2016). Declining state funding and efficiency effects on public higher education: Government really does matter. *International Advances in Economic Research*, 22, 397-408.
- Schlechty, P. C., & Vance, V. S. (1983). Recruitment, selection, and retention: The shape of the teaching force. *The Elementary School Journal*, 83(4), 469-487.
- Schoorman, D. (2024). Waking up to the 'Anti-Woke' agenda. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2024.2364632>
- Senate, F. S. (2022). *SB 7044: Postsecondary Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2022/7044/BillText/er/PDF>
- Senate, F. S. (2023a). *SB 266: Higher Education*. Retrieved from <https://www.flsenate.gov/Session/Bill/2023/266/BillText/er/HTML>
- Senate, F. S. (2023b). *SB 846: Agreements of Educational Entities with Foreign Entities*.

- Staff. (2019). *Governor Ron DeSantis Appoints Brian Lamb to the State University System Board of Governors* <https://www.flgov.com/2019/03/28/governor-ron-desantis-appoints-brian-lamb-to-the-state-university-system-board-of-governors/>
- Staff. (2023). *Governor Ron DeSantis Reappoints Two to the Board of Governors of the State University System* <https://www.flgov.com/2023/12/15/governor-ron-desantis-reappoints-two-to-the-board-of-governors-of-the-state-university-system/>
- Steele, C. (2011). *Whistling Vivaldi: How stereotypes affect us and what we can do*. WW Norton & Company.
- Talmy, S. (2010). Qualitative Interviews in Applied Linguistics: From Research Instrument to Social Practice. *Annual review of applied linguistics*, 30(Mar), 128-148. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190510000085>
- U.S., C. (1791). *Amendment X*.
- Walker, D. H. T. (1997). Choosing an appropriate research methodology. *Construction management and economics*, 15(2), 149-159.
- Warikoo, N. (2018). What meritocracy means to its winners: Admissions, race, and inequality at elite universities in the United States and Britain. *Social Sciences*, 7(8), 131.
- Wilkinson, S. (1988). The role of reflexivity in feminist psychology. *11*, 493-502.
- Willig, C. (2013). *EBOOK: introducing qualitative research in psychology*. McGraw-hill education (UK).

# Appendix I- CUREC 1a Application Form Sections C-E

SECTION C: The research project	
1. Title of the research project	
The Sunshine State Dilemma: Decoding Florida Higher Education’s Autonomy and Policy Theatrics in the Ron DeSantis Era	
2. Anticipated start date of the aspect of the research project involving human participants and/ or personal data (dd/mm/yy).	<b>01/06/2024 (or as soon as CUREC form is approved)</b>
3. Anticipated research end date (dd/mm/yy).	<b>30/09/2024</b>
4. Provide a brief lay summary of the aims and objectives of the research. This should cover the questions it will answer and any potential benefits. (max 300 words)	
<p>This study aims to provide a critical understanding of the higher educational landscape in the state of Florida in relation to legislative action taken by the DeSantis administration to remodel the way state institutions function and carry out the processes of researching, teaching, and learning. The state of Florida has passed legislation restricting higher education institutions within the state from carrying out official business as it relates to education and student wellness.</p> <p>The objectives of this study pertain to examining the following questions in detail as they relate to the evolving nature of higher education in the state of Florida:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How autonomous is higher education in Florida amidst recent policy changes?</li> <li>2. Does the implementation of these policies indicate a broader transformation of higher education in the state and how much of it is political theater?</li> </ol> <p>The importance of these questions derives from their ability to address deeply rooted areas of conflict between the state legislature and higher education institutions. In applying a literature review, policy document analysis, news report analysis, and semi structured interviews, valuable insight will be gathered and provided as to the nature of state higher educational policy and its new relationship with key stakeholders within institutional systems. The potential benefits of such inquisition include uncovering the new dynamic between authority and autonomy within Florida higher education, observing senior educational faculty’s decision making during a time of academic uncertainty, and being able to discern between legitimate political power and administrative theatrics.</p>	
5. Please indicate the methods to be used (indicate with an ‘X’):	
Analysis of existing records	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters (refer to guidance in <a href="#">BPG 01: Researcher safety</a> )	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant observation	<input type="checkbox"/>

Covert observation	<input type="checkbox"/>
Observation of specific organisational practices	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task (refer to guidance in <a href="#">BPG 06: Internet-mediated research</a> )	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using social media to recruit or interact with participants (refer to guidance in <a href="#">BPG 06: Internet-mediated research</a> )	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Participant performs paper and pencil task	<input type="checkbox"/>
Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focus group	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interview (refer to guidance in <a href="#">BPG 10: Conducting research interviews</a> )	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<a href="#">Audio recording</a> of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<a href="#">Video recording</a> of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Others (please specify below)	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>6. Provide a brief summary of the research design and methods. What will research participants be asked to do? (max 300 words) Please also submit a copy of the questions participants will be asked, if applicable, or some information about the sorts of topics that will be covered.</p>	
<p>The research design and methodology of this study includes semi-structured interviews with senior faculty of Florida College System institutions/state universities and members of the DeSantis administration. The sampling conditions for participant selection will combine aspects of both purposive and snowball sampling. To achieve the highest quality of data analysis, 8-12 participants will be sought out for their specific role in Florida higher education and the unique perspectives they can provide to the study. The researcher will utilize the participants' willingness to provide other relevant potential contacts for participation in the study. The researcher will also apply document analysis techniques to state higher education policy, press releases, and institutional statements related to the matter.</p> <p>Research participants will be asked to participate in semi-structured interviews after signing written consent forms and verbally consenting to an audio recording being taken of the interview. All consent forms and audio recordings/transcriptions will be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers, which is also where all coded and themed data will be kept.</p> <p>Potential topics to be covered in the interview sessions:</p>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal/external pressure from stakeholders</li> <li>• Lifespan of the new policies and their staying power</li> <li>• The next steps for respective position (either faculty or government official)</li> <li>• The effect of policy on Florida institutional research output and capabilities</li> <li>• Autonomy of Florida higher education</li> </ul>		
7. List the location(s) where the research will be conducted, including any other countries.	Remote interviews will be conducted in the United States and England	
8. Clarify which parts of the research will be conducted in-person and which will take place remotely, e.g. <a href="#">online</a> .	All interviews will be conducted remotely	
9. If your research involves fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? Please indicate with an 'X'. (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are advised to take out <a href="#">University travel insurance</a> .) Refer to guidance available from your Department, the <a href="#">Safety Office</a> , the <a href="#">Social Sciences Division</a> , and the <a href="#">Humanities Division</a> , and on <a href="#">travel for University business</a> .	Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
	No	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Not required in this instance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. In the case of international or collaborative research, explain how you will address any ethical issues specific to the local context. Please provide details of the local review, approval or permission obtained or required. Refer to the <a href="#">BPG 16: Social science research conducted outside the UK</a> and the <a href="#">Code of Conduct for Ethical Fieldwork</a> . If there will be no local review, explain why not. Please mention any stakeholder or community engagement that has been/ will be undertaken in relation to the research. Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in <a href="#">Section G</a> .		
Not applicable		
11. Name of departmental/ peer reviewer (if applicable)	Not applicable	
12. External organisation funding the research and grant reference (if applicable)	Not applicable	

13. Please refer to the <a href="#">CUREC Best Practice Guidance</a> and list any that have been used to develop your research.	BPG 03 Elite and expert interviewing BPG 06 Internet-mediated research BPG 09 Data collection, protection, and management BPG 10 Conducting research interviews
---	--

SECTION D: Recruitment of research participants		
1. Number of participants	8-12	
2. How was the number of participants decided?	The number of interview participants was decided in consultation with my PI. I considered the condensed timeframe in which I'd be working with to complete this dissertation and chose to exceed the minimum number of interviews necessary to gather substantive insight and information to use in this project.	
3. Age range of participants	18 and over	
4. Inclusion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Members of the DeSantis administration</li> <li>- Members of the Florida Department of Education</li> <li>- Senior faculty members of Florida College System institutions/state universities</li> </ul>	
5. Exclusion criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Faculty of private higher education institutions in Florida</li> </ul>	
6. Indicate with an 'X' all intended recruitment methods <b>Please submit copies of the recruitment material that will be used, e.g. advertisement text, introductory email text.</b>	Poster advert	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Flyer	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Email circulation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Website	<input type="checkbox"/>
	In-person approach	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Snowball sampling	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Recruitment sites (e.g. Mechanical Turk)	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Existing contacts or volunteer database	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Other (please specify):	

	Advisor recommendation/professional network utilization	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>7. How will potential participants be identified and approached?</p>	<p>Potential participants in this study will be identified in consultation with the principal investigator and an examination of senior faculty members of qualifying institutions according to the inclusion criteria. Also, members of the DeSantis administration and the Florida department of education will be sought out for their active engagement in the state’s policy making. The ways in which potential participants will be approached are as follows:</p> <p><u>Existing Network Utilization</u> Professional contacts had by the principal investigator or prior knowledge of their work in higher education will be of key interest.</p> <p><u>Email Correspondence</u> Every potential participant will be emailed from the following official Oxford University email:</p> <hr style="width: 20%; margin-left: 0;"/> <p>Each initial email will begin with a brief introduction of myself, where I will then explain the objectives and significance of the study and ask for their participation in an interview. The recipient’s email address will have been obtained from the official website through which the participant is employed, whether that be a government website or an institutional one. Participant recruitment will adhere to BPG 03 Elite and expert interviewing outlines.</p> <p><u>Snowball Sampling</u> Participants of the study will be asked to if they are willing to provide relevant professional contacts that may also be interested in granting an interview. This sampling will help limit oversight that may occur during the initial emailing process.</p>	
<p>8. Will informed consent be obtained from the research participants or their parents/guardians? If not, please explain why not.</p>	<p>Yes</p>	

<p>9. For each activity or group of participants, explain how <a href="#">informed consent</a> will be obtained from the participants themselves and/ or their parents/ guardians, if applicable. How will their consent be recorded?</p> <p><b>Please submit copies of all participant-facing materials for review. E.g.:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruitment material (e.g. emails, posters)</li> <li>• Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script).</li> <li>• A document to record informed consent.</li> </ul> <p><a href="#">Further guidance and templates.</a></p>	<p>All participants will be again contacted by email after they've confirmed their interest in participating in the study. The follow up email will consist of a brief but detailed information sheet outlining what participating in the interview process will look like, as well as reiterate the objectives of the study and how they related to the data collection process. The email will also include a form requesting the potential participant's consent to partake in the interview. Audio recorded consent will also be asked of the participant. A separate form will ask participants' permission to use statements from their interview in the published work. All participants and their contributions to the study will be kept anonymous. All recorded consent and permission forms will be stored on the Oxford University one drive.</p>
<p>10. Provide details of any payments and incentives and the rationale for providing these. Further guidance in <a href="#">Best Practice Guidance: 05 Payments and incentives in research.</a></p>	<p>None</p>
<p>11. Describe how participants</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• may withdraw from the study</li> <li>• may withdraw any personal information they have provided from the study</li> </ul> <p>State any limits to withdrawal, for example once the data has been <a href="#">anonymised</a> or at some other specified stage prior to publication. Make sure participants are aware of any withdrawal limits.</p>	<p>Participants will be able to withdraw themselves from participation in this study by notifying the researcher of their decision to do so by July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024. Participants have until the data is anonymized to withdraw any personal information collected during the interview process by notifying the researcher of their decision to do so. No explanation will be required of any participant when withdrawing their consent.</p>

## SECTION E: Research data

All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as [personal data](#); any personal data which is sensitive is considered [special category data](#). Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the [University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research](#).

In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the [Data Protection Checklist](#) and [Data Protection Screening Assessment](#) and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate [Data Protection Impact Assessment](#) may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from [Research Data Oxford](#) and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from the [Information Compliance team](#).

For guidance on conducting internet-mediated research, refer to CUREC's [Best Practice Guidance 06: Internet-mediated research](#).

1. What data will be collected? (Indicate with an 'X')

Screening documents	<input type="checkbox"/>	Task results (e.g. questionnaires, diaries)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consent records ( e.g., written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	IP addresses (refer to <a href="#">Best Practice Guidance 09: Data collection, protection and management</a> for guidance)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact details for the purpose of this research only	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Field notes	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contact details for future use ( <a href="#">guidance</a> )	<input type="checkbox"/>	Photographs	<input type="checkbox"/>
Opt-out forms	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Information about the health of the participant (including mental health)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio recordings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Previously collected (secondary) data	<input type="checkbox"/>
Video recordings	<input type="checkbox"/>	Data already in the public domain. Specify the source of the data:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. During the course of the research, where will **each type of** research data be stored?

Consent records- All written consent forms and audio recorded consent will be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. Consent records will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study's submission.

Contact details- All contact details will be securely stored digitally within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. This information will be kept until completion of the study and then discarded.

Opt-out forms- All opt-out forms will be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. They will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study's submission.

Audio recordings- All audio recordings will be stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers and protected

	<p>with a password. Audio files will be retained until all data is transcribed where they will subsequently be securely destroyed.</p> <p>Audio transcriptions- All audio transcriptions will be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. Audio transcriptions will be kept for a minimum of three years after the study's submission.</p>		
3. Who will have access to the research data during the project?	Only the researcher and the project supervisor will have access to the stored data. Total access will be given to both the researcher for the purpose of completing the project and the advisor to provide guidance where and when necessary. Pseudonymized data will be identifiable via code names or number sequences.		
4. Please complete this section if your research involves the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data.	<b>Please indicated with an 'X'.</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
	Are data access agreements in place for access to and use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Did the individuals agree that their data could be used for this purpose?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Could anyone (including members of the research team) link the data back to an individual or individuals? If this is a possibility, please explain how the associated ethical issues will be addressed:	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. How do you intend to share the research data at the end of the project?	Depositing in a specialist data centre or archive	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Submitting to a journal to support a publication	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Depositing in an institutional repository	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Dissemination via a project or institutional website	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	No plans to share the data	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6. How do you intend to report and disseminate the results of the research? (Indicate with an 'X')	Thesis publication	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publication in a peer reviewed journal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publicly available report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Conference presentation	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Publication on a website	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Pre-registration	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	
	Report to a research funder	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	

	Providing participants with a lay summary of the results	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Submission for academic assessment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Explain what will happen to the data at the end of the research project. This question must be answered for each type of data, including completed consent forms.		
<p>All data collected and used during this study will be stored securely within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. It will be kept for a minimum of three years after submission of the study. Given the researcher finishes their degree before the three years expire (an all-but certain outcome), the data and its storage responsibility will be passed on the Principal Investigator.</p> <p>Audio recordings will be stored securely within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers until anonymized transcription is complete. Once the data is transcribed, all audio recordings and any existing copies will be securely destroyed, and the transcription data will be pseudonymized or anonymized and stored securely within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. This data will be kept for a minimum of three years after submission of the study.</p>		

SECTION F: Protection of research participants and their personal data		
1. How identifiable will the participants be from the <b>research outputs</b> ? (Indicate with an 'X')	Directly identifiable from the information included	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<u>Pseudonymised</u> / indirectly identifiable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Not identifiable – data is <u>anonymous</u>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Other, please specify:	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. To what extent will the <b>data</b> be <u>de-identified</u> ? How identifiable will any individuals be from the research data? Describe any measures you will take towards assuring <u>confidentiality</u> , potential risks to confidentiality.	<p>The de-identification process will be swift and thorough as all direct identifiers will be removed from the data. This includes but is not limited to email addresses, physical addresses, and names of participants. Indirect identifiers will be handled on a case-by-case basis with any uncertainty lending itself toward further de-identification.</p> <p>Ensuring the confidentiality of the study's participants and their data is a top priority for the researcher. Measures to be taken include:</p> <p>Reviewing for identifiable information- all data will be reviewed by the researcher to ensure no identifiable information remains in the usable data.</p>	

	<p>Pseudonymization/Anonymization- To ensure both the confidentiality and usability of the data, all information will be pseudonymized/anonymized to only be identifiable to the researcher and supervisor.</p> <p>Data Storage- All data will be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. It will be guarded by various security measures like passwords, multi-factor authentication, and encryption. Access to these files will only be given to the researcher and the project’s supervisor.</p>
<p>3. How will you ensure that third parties (e.g., interpreters and transcribers) are aware of and adhere to the measures described in this form?</p>	<p>This study will not use the services of any third parties. All data storage will be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. This will be done to safeguard the data and ensure that privacy and confidentiality remains at the forefront of the study.</p>

<p><b>SECTION G: Risks and benefits of the research</b></p>	
<p>1. Will the research involve topics that could be considered <u>sensitive</u>? If so:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Please provide more detail or supporting information (such as the interview questions) to show the range of questions;</li> <li>b. Explain what steps will be taken to reduce risk of distress;</li> <li>c. Consider seeking advice from within your Department or from the ethics committee including whether the application might benefit from additional ethics review (e.g., via a CUREC 2 application).</li> </ul>	
	<p>This research involves a politically contentious issue in the United States and specifically the state of Florida. Steps taken to reduce the risk of distress for participants include providing them a succinct information sheet fully disclosing the topics to be covered in the interview as well as requiring the explicit consent of each research participant. This will be obtained via signed documentation and recorded audio confirmation prior to an interview.</p>
<p>2. Describe any additional burden or risks to the participants or others, including the potential for any indirect negative consequences. Explain the steps you will take to address these.</p>	
	<p>Individual perspectives and institutional reputation- The inherent risk of discussing politically contentious topics is the increased likelihood of controversial opinions being shared. This study will aim to disclose all opinions of this nature within the context of the conversation and study, placing priority on participant anonymity.</p> <p>Consent and data security- In handling special category data, explicitly expressed consent to use the data collected during the interview process will be required before any next steps are</p>

taken. This data will also be securely stored within Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint, or University servers. A heightened regard to data security will be placed on all special category data and will only be accessible to the research and project supervisor.

3. Describe any physical or psychological risks to the researcher(s) (including local fieldworkers or research assistants) and the steps you will take to address these.

The researcher will not face any unusual physical risks as all interviews will be conducted remotely.

Psychological risks that the researcher may face and steps to address them:

- High-stress deadlines and burnout- The researcher plans to mitigate these risks by allowing for proper self-care in between interview sessions. Having reasonable expectations of what work/life balance should be during intense periods of research is key to good time management.
- Challenges presented by government officials and senior faculty- Members of society in positions of authority can present professional and emotional stressors for researchers. It is important that the researcher maintain a professional attitude throughout all encounters and a mitigating strategy will include fostering a friendly and inviting atmospheres for all participants.

4. Describe any benefits of the research, both to participants and to others. Outline the processes put in place to enable equitable research (see [BPG 16 Social science research conducted outside the UK](#) for further guidance).

Participants will benefit from an amplification of their perspectives on the reshaping of Florida higher education. Their contributions will aid future scholarship across the United States as the purpose of higher education is being called into question and institutional autonomy is no longer assured.

Policy makers will benefit from the empirical findings of this qualitative research. Shared themes of thought and behavior as a response to state legislative action can be used to quickly adapt and adjust policy.

This study implements multiple steps to ensure equitable research practices. All participants are volunteers and will only participate after fully consenting to the use of their pseudonymized/anonymized data, knowing before, during, and after that they can withdraw their consent at any time. All findings will be shared with study participants before submission. Any senior faculty members of Florida College System institutions/state universities will be afforded the opportunity to participate in this research, allowing for a diverse selection of institutions. This study also undergoes an ethics review by the University to ensure that ethics standards were adhered to.

5. Comment on the societal impact.

This research will examine in real time the effects of restricting higher education institutional autonomy through legislative action. The state of Florida is spearheading the charge to reshape higher education in the United States the way it best sees fit. Research such as this, early into the political restructuring process, allows for the researcher to identify societal problems that have arisen or may arise from the state government taking such a proactive role in the business of higher education institutions.

Intensive analysis of policies such as Senate Bill 266 and related laws will give insight to the future of legislative action in the state. Examining the relationships between key stakeholders in Florida higher education will be vital in understanding the direction of educational research/output and what effect such policies will have on institutional reputation in the state.

The proactive stance this research is taking can contribute to other current and future research on state higher education across the United States as state legislatures begin to further politicize education. By identifying important themes and modes of reasoning in Florida, future state legislative attempts to follow in its path can be detected before significant damage to university autonomy is done.

6. Give details of any other ethical issues or relevant information.

Not applicable

SECTION H: Professional guidelines		
Please indicate with an 'X' at least one set of professional guidelines you will follow.		
Research specialization/ methodology	Association and guidance	
Anthropology	<a href="#">Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Computer Science	<a href="#">ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Criminology	<a href="#">British Society of Criminology Statement of Ethics</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Education	<a href="#">British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research</a>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Geography	<a href="#">American Association of Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
History	<a href="#">Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Internet-mediated research	<a href="#">Association of Internet Researchers Ethical Guidelines</a> <a href="#">British Psychological Society: Ethics Guidelines for internet-mediated research</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	<a href="#">Association for Computing Machinery Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Management	<a href="#">Academy of Management Code of Ethics</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Political Science	<a href="#">American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Politics	<a href="#">Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Psychology	<a href="#">British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social research	<a href="#">Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Socio-legal studies	<a href="#">Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research Practice</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sociology	<a href="#">The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Visual research	<a href="#">ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research</a>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other professional guidelines		<input type="checkbox"/>

## SECTION I: Endorsements and signatures

Please ensure this form is endorsed by the [Principal Investigator](#) (or student's supervisor), the Head of Department (or nominee) and, if student research, by the student themselves.

**The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a [DREC](#), check which signature option it prefers.**

- **Option 1: direct email endorsements**

Each of the signatories should submit an email from a University of Oxford email address, indicating their acceptance of the responsibilities listed below.

- **Option 2: signatures**


Please scan the signed form and email it to us as a PDF. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.

### Endorsement by the Principal Investigator/ student supervisor and student, if applicable

I/ we the researchers understand my/ our responsibilities as Principal Investigator (and student, if applicable) as outlined in the guidance on the CUREC website. I/ we declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that the ethics committee will be informed of any changes to the project which affect the answers to this form.  
I/ we will inform the relevant IDREC if the Principal Investigator changes.

Name of Principal Investigator

Simon Marginson

Principal Investigator's signature	
Date	
Name of student (if applicable)	Zachary Resatar
Student's signature	
Date	16/05/2024

<p><b>Departmental endorsement</b> – from the Head of Department or nominee          (Another senior member of the department may sign where the head of department is the Principal Investigator, or where the Head of Department has appointed a nominee. Example nominees include Deputy Head of Department, Director of Research, or Director of Graduate/ Undergraduate Studies.)</p>	
<p>On the basis of the information available to me, I confirm that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I am aware of the research proposed and have read this application;</li> <li>• To the best of my knowledge, the proposed design and scientific methodology do not raise ethical concerns;</li> <li>• I support this research in principle, subject to ethical and other necessary reviews.</li> </ul>	
Signature	Instead of a signature, endorsement may be provided by an email confirming the points above.
Name	
Role	
Date	

## Appendix II- CUREC 1a Approval Confirmation

Zach Resatar  
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division  
University of Oxford

21.05.24

Dear Zach,

### Research ethics approval

**Research title:** The Sunshine State Dilemma: Decoding Florida Higher Education's Autonomy and Policy Theatrics in the Ron DeSantis Era

**Research ethics reference:** EDUC\_C1A\_24\_157

The above application has been considered on behalf of the Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this study.

Please note the following:

**Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

**In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

**Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

Robert Klassen



DREC Member      cc:      Simon Marginson, Amy Bennett

## Appendix III- Recruitment Email

Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Study on Higher Educational Autonomy in Florida

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. My name is Zach Resatar, and I am a master's student at the University of Oxford studying Higher Education. I am conducting a study on the autonomy of higher education institutions in Florida. The aim of this study is to critically examine the impact of recent legislative actions on the operations and academic processes within state colleges and universities.

Given your esteemed position and extensive experience within the [Florida College System/State University System], your insights and perspectives would be invaluable to this research. I am writing to invite you to participate in this study and share your experiences and thoughts on this critical issue.

Participation would involve a one-hour, semi-structured interview in June at a time convenient for you. Your contribution will help in developing a comprehensive understanding of the current educational landscape and the effects of legislative changes on institutional autonomy. If you are willing to participate, please let me know your availability, and I will arrange a meeting at your convenience. In this email I have included a participant information sheet to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your participation would greatly enrich the study and contribute to a meaningful discussion on the future of higher education in Florida.

Best regards,

Zach Resatar

MSc Higher Education Researcher

University of Oxford

## **Appendix IV- Participant Information Sheet**

### ***The Sunshine State Dilemma: Decoding Florida Higher Education's Autonomy and Policy Theatrics in the Ron DeSantis Era* PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Central University Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: **EDUC\_C1A\_24\_157**

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you wish to take part.

#### About the Study

This study seeks to examine the higher education landscape in Florida, focusing on legislative measures enacted by the DeSantis administration to restructure the functioning of state institutions and their research, teaching, and learning processes. Florida has enacted laws limiting the ability of higher education institutions to conduct official business related to education and student well-being. Most of these policy changes are less than one year old, so this research intends to differentiate between the staying power of such legislation and the political benefits the state legislation stand to gain from them. Current and future higher educational autonomy in the state of Florida, and the ways in which these institutions function, will serve as a driving force behind this project. A literature review, policy document analysis, and 10 semi-structured interviews will serve as the data to be collected.

#### Invitation

This study plans to conduct 10 interviews with senior faculty members of Florida College System institutions/state universities that are familiar with the way their institution functioned before the implementation of these policies and are now working within new legislative guidelines. Members of the DeSantis administration and the Florida Department of Education are also invited to share their vision for the future of higher education within the state.

Your experience and area of expertise would greatly enhance the depth and scope of this study, which is why we humbly ask for your contribution. Though your participation would be greatly appreciated and immensely valuable, please allow me to state that you are under no obligation to take part, and even if you do, you will have until July 9<sup>th</sup> to completely withdraw from the study without any reason simply by alerting me of your decision to do so. If you were to withdraw, all data you had provided would be destroyed immediately.

### **What Will Participation Look Like?**

Your consent is crucial to the data collection process and can only happen once you return a signed written consent form. The consent form will be sent to you via email, and we would greatly appreciate if they returned that way. Once you consent to participating in this study, we will schedule an online interview on Microsoft Teams for approximately one hour. Interviews will be scheduled at your convenience with dates available throughout the month of June 2024.

This study will also utilize an audio recording of the interview, which must be consented to beforehand. Consent will be asked for again on the record to begin the interview. If this is not an option you are comfortable with, the data will be collected via handwritten notes. All data obtained in the audio recordings will be transcribed, coded, and anonymized while being stored securely on the University servers.

### **Possible Risks and Disadvantages**

The objectives of this study include developing an understanding of Florida higher education amidst legislative restructurings. While this study does not explicitly explore sensitive topics, it is possible that situations arise where participants hold potentially contentious opinions because of their specific association with Florida higher education. All potential risks will be mitigated by upholding the standards of ethical research and the implementation of an evaluation process that is fair and supported by evidence. Confidentiality is stressed by the researcher and all participants can be assured in good faith that their data will be handled appropriately.

### **Potential Benefits**

By participating in this study, you can benefit from the amplification of your unique and critical perspectives while contributing to future scholarship in higher education around the United States and the state of Florida. Higher education legislation can benefit from insight provided by those who have experienced the challenges that institutions face through restructuring.

### **Data Collection**

As mentioned in the participation section, consent will be required from you to conduct an audio recorded interview and subsequent transcription. After transcription, your data will be anonymized. Audio files will be deleted after the transcription takes place and then all data will be stored on the University of Oxford's servers. Your data will be protected using encryption techniques while being ascribed strict confidentiality between researcher and supervisor. All data will be stored on the University's servers for a minimum of three years, though all contact information will be discarded upon completion of the study.

The research findings will be presented as part of the researcher's master's dissertation. There is a potential for the findings to also be presented at conferences and/or published in an academic journal.

## **Data Security**

The University of Oxford is the data controller with respect to your personal data, and as such will determine how your personal data is used in the research. The University will process your personal data for the purpose of the research outlined above. Research is a task that is performed in the public interest. Further information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from the University's Information Compliance website at <https://compliance.admin.ox.ac.uk/individual-rights>.

## **Who Has Reviewed This Research?**

This research has received ethics approval from a subcommittee of the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee. (Ethics reference: **EDUC\_C1A\_24\_157**).

## **Contact**

Should you require further information or if you wish to discuss the research before participating, please email the lead researcher, Zach Resatar, at the following address: [z.resatar@ox.ac.uk](mailto:z.resatar@ox.ac.uk). Supervising this project is Simon Marginson. Please contact either Zach Resatar or Simon Marginson with any concerns or inquiries you have about this research. Any concerns or inquiries made with Zach Resatar will be addressed within two days and will include the next steps toward an appropriate solution. If this does not provide a satisfactory result, you may file a formal complaint with the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford: [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

---

# Appendix V- Participant Consent Form

## Consent to take part in *The Sunshine State Dilemma: Decoding Florida Higher Education's Autonomy and Policy Theatrics in the Ron DeSantis Era*

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval reference: [N/A]

Purpose of Study: This study aims to provide a critical understanding of the higher educational landscape in the state of Florida in relation to legislative action taken by the DeSantis administration to remodel the way state institutions function and carry out the processes of researching, teaching, and learning.

**Please initial  
each box if you  
agree with the  
statement**

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet, dated \_\_\_\_\_ for the above research. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any point until **09/Jul/24**, without giving any reason.

I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.

I understand the extent to which I could be identifiable from any publications.

I consent to being audio recorded.

I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs.

I give permission for you to contact me again to clarify information.

I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.

I hereby assign to the researcher all copyright in my contribution for use in all work stemming from this project and future projects.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking  
consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date<sup>1</sup>

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
<sup>1</sup> To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant. Once this has been signed by both parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form. The original signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents, which must be kept in a secure location.