

UF and the Future of US Public Higher Education

Statement by the Board of Directors of the Retired Faculty of the University of Florida

Early in Fall 2021, the University of Florida was celebrated and honored to be designated as one of the five leading public universities in the US. Unfortunately, soon afterwards, UF managed to achieve the negative distinction of becoming the leading example in the US of political interference and subservience to partisan political interests by a large and distinguished American public university.

Currently, it is the latter distinction for which the University of Florida is most widely known nationwide and beyond. UF has recently been cited, often repeatedly, as a disturbing example in *Science*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and other national as well as state-level publications. In addition, UF's actions and policies have resulted in legal proceedings and a continuing inquiry into the university's accreditation by the regional accrediting authority.

The Board of Directors of the Retired Faculty of the University of Florida (RFUF) is dismayed by this largely self-inflicted damage that UF's administration and its trustees have brought on our valued university. Moreover, the example UF has set threatens not only to tarnish its reputation, but also to erode and potentially undermine the critical roles that public universities nationwide play in fostering broad-based higher education and world-leading research, as well as embodying positive American values.

Three main areas have emerged of apparent politically-based interference in academic activities and the academic mission of UF, each of which alone would have raised serious concern – together, they have and should generate alarm. These include:

- (1) asserted restrictions by the university on the ability of UF faculty members to cite their expertise in public and legal fora, particularly when the implications of that expertise may contradict the preferred viewpoints of political authorities;
- (2) attempts to restrict or control the intellectual content of courses as well as the conduct and dissemination of research when the implications of that educational instruction and/or research may contradict the preferred viewpoints of political authorities; and
- (3) political interference in university hiring decisions and potentially also in decisions on retention and/or promotion. The most glaring example of this in 2021 was the politically promoted and inordinately rushed hiring of a senior medical faculty member whose scientifically unsupported views on the most important medical issue of this decade would ordinarily have called for further scrutiny had the appointment not been viewed as coinciding with the policies and views of political authorities.

Among the many negative outcomes of these policy decisions has been a widely cited climate of apprehension and self-censorship, notably by untenured faculty and researchers but also among tenured faculty and most glaringly and consequentially by high level university administrators

themselves. Statements and actions by a range of UF administrators indicate that fear of financial or employment retribution by state level political authorities has begun to pervade decision making across multiple arenas. This spreading debilitation threatens to restrict the free expression of viewpoints and involvement in research, teaching, and public commentary across much of the UF community.

It does not require much historical imagination to recognize that should such conditions be allowed to persist and become a model across this state and nationwide, that the internationally admired system of first-class public universities in the US could devolve into the politically constricted educational institutions that characterize authoritarian states of both the left and right.

As retired faculty who represent the extraordinarily wide range of disciplines at the University of Florida, we feel that it is extremely important that these policies of political coercion and their underlying rationalizations be explicitly rejected and decisively reversed. Moreover, in order for UF to attract a new President with high stature in 2022, it will be essential that the university's administration, faculty and Board of Trustees make it absolutely clear that political influence on and interference in research, teaching, employment, and the dissemination of expertise will play no role at the University of Florida and are inconsistent with academic and broader political freedom in the United States.

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