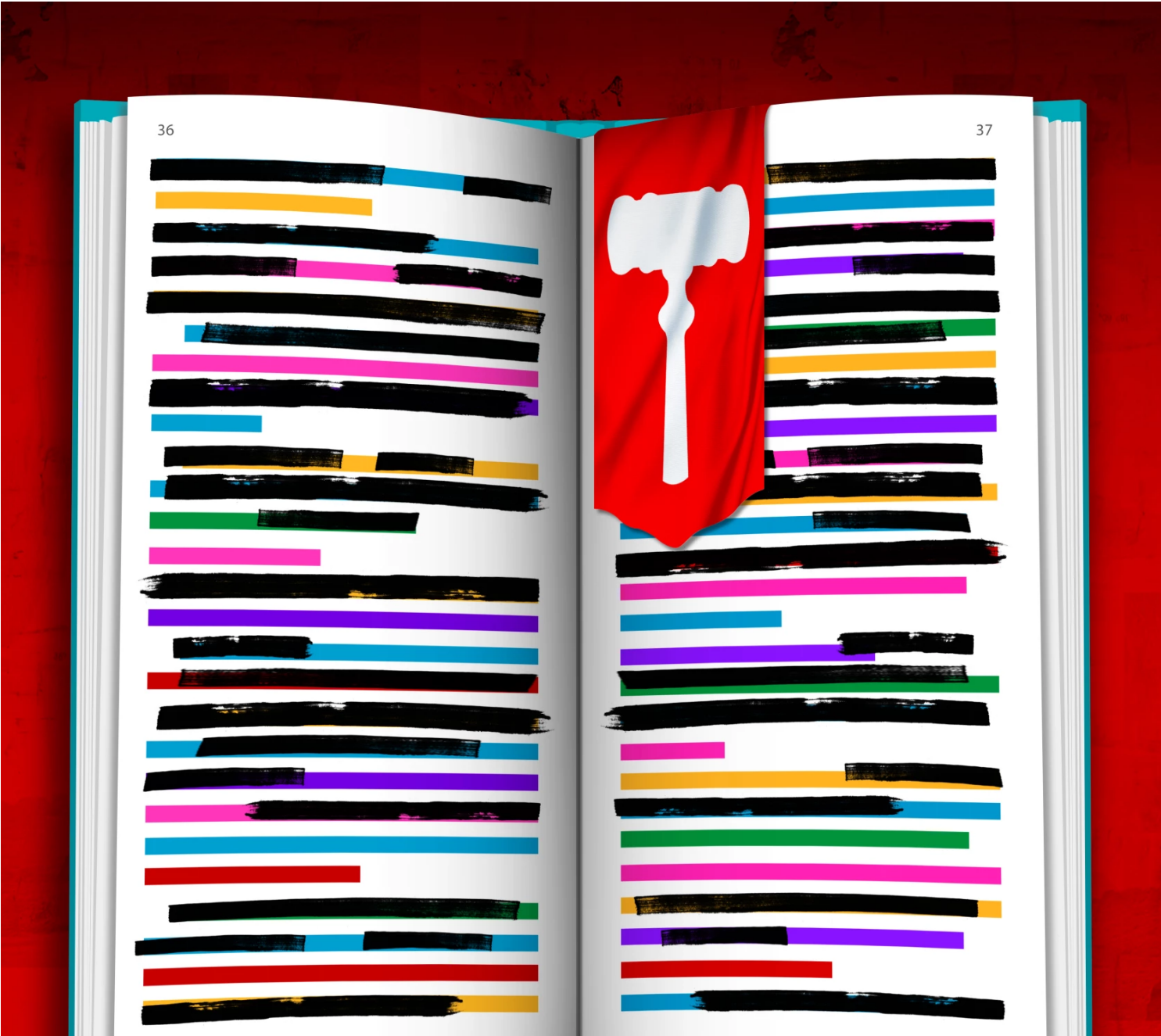


# Conservative Attacks on Higher Ed Are Attacks on Democracy

DeSantis and Co.'s claims to be serving the people's will are fake.



By *Amna Khalid and Jeffrey Aaron Snyder*

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“DeSantis is putting the public back in public universities,” a recent [headline](#) from *National Review* declared. Conservative politicians, strategists, and pundits love to trumpet the claim that Gov. Ron DeSantis’s model of higher-education reform is [“democracy in action.”](#) This is false.

The Florida legislature is currently considering House Bill 999, which would cut professors out of the faculty-hiring process, eliminate funding for all campus diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, and effectively ban any coursework in “critical theory,” including “critical race theory,” “queer theory,” and “intersectionality.”

“I’m a fan,” conservative writer Nate Hochman [said](#) about HB 999, in an interview for the *New York Times* last month:

I think the bill is right on the merits, but I also don’t recognize the allegations of “authoritarianism” that are made about these and related efforts from DeSantis as it pertains to higher-education reform. To the contrary, this is democracy in action... These are state or state-funded institutions we’re talking about, and DeSantis and the Florida Legislature are the representatives that Florida’s voters (overwhelmingly!) elected to govern said institutions. To suggest that they should be insulated from oversight, reform or accountability to elected lawmakers is to reject a basic principle of democratic self-determination — that the voters, via the representatives they elect, get the final say in how their tax dollars are spent.

All this talk about democratic accountability for public institutions can be seductive. But lest we be swayed by the high-minded rhetoric, let’s pause for a moment to consider the meaning of “public” itself. As Columbia University English professor Bruce Robbins [explains](#), there are

important “ambiguities” when the term is invoked to represent the “social whole.” Paraphrasing Robbins, “public” can refer to what is *decided on* or *managed* by the community, as well as what is *available to* or done *in the service of* the community. The former emphasizes public control, while the latter stresses public access.

The “public” in public higher education is primarily about *access* to higher-education institutions that are dedicated to *servicing* the public. Of course, members of the public should have a say in shaping public colleges. But those with the requisite expertise, namely faculty members, must be at the forefront when it comes to making decisions about teaching and research. As the American Association of University Professors has [argued](#) for more than a century, this is essential if colleges are to remain true to their mission to generate and disseminate knowledge.

*The Atlantic* staff writer Tom Nicols [warned](#) us back in 2019 that President Donald Trump’s disdain for expertise would outlive his administration. Sure enough, following in Trump’s footsteps, DeSantis is mounting an aggressive attack on expert knowledge, stripping away the decision-making powers that professors have had for more than a century regarding critical educational matters. HB 999 would sideline faculty by investing state lawmakers, university presidents, and trustees with the power to make decisions on everything from the curriculum to faculty hiring and promotion. Florida’s GOP clearly never got the memo that academic freedom and faculty autonomy have helped to make the U.S. higher-education system the envy of the world.

## **Higher-education reform in the Sunshine State is not a good-faith effort to put the public back in public universities.**

Grandstanding populist rhetoric provides a veneer of righteousness to the DeSantis higher-ed reform agenda. Consider this [statement](#) by Christopher F. Rufo, architect of the nationwide anti-CRT crusade and policy adviser to DeSantis: “I believe in an uncompromising new conservatism

that attempts to restore the authority of the people over their government — and lay waste to woke institutional capture.”

For Rufo and co., campuses are first and foremost culture-war battlegrounds — and they have no qualms about using scorched-earth tactics. Last year, Rufo was one of six new conservative trustees appointed to the New College of Florida, a public liberal-arts college in Sarasota that the DeSantis administration is determined to turn into the [“Hillsdale of the South.”](#) Here is how Rufo [described](#) the sea change to come: “We will be shutting down low-performing, ideologically-captured academic departments and hiring new faculty. The student body will be recomposed over time: some current students will self-select out, others will graduate; we’ll recruit new students who are mission-aligned.”

As one Twitter commentator aptly [put it](#): “This is Soviet-era shit.”

Rufo has no patience for the powers of persuasion when raw power will do. After Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker criticized the heavy-handed moves to re-make New College, Rufo [replied](#): “Sorry, buddy... We’re in charge now.” Rufo and the other newly installed trustees have already succeeded in [replacing](#) the college’s president and [abolishing](#) the college’s diversity office, achieving the first steps in what Rufo described as the [“hostile takeover”](#) of New College.

You would need a geologist to sort through all the layers of hypocrisy embedded in the ongoing transformation of public higher education in Florida. On the one hand, the Florida reform model rejects frameworks such as critical race theory, DEI, and intersectionality as too ideological, nothing more than [“woke indoctrination”](#) masquerading as scholarship. On the other, it says universities must promote concepts such as “individual rights,” “patriotism,” and “Western Civilization.” Nothing ideological to see here, right?

At a press conference in January, Rufo [said](#) that “the purpose of a university is not to push political activism.” At around the same time, he released a YouTube [video](#) called “The Conservative Counter-Revolution Begins in the Universities,” in which he outlined DeSantis’s

plan to “recapture territory” on Florida’s public campuses. All the rhetoric about democracy, accountability, and the will-of-the-people rings hollow given that Rufo has compared his “public persuasion campaign” to Communist propaganda, openly describing his strategy to turn the phrase “critical race theory” into the “perfect villain.”

Higher-education reform in the Sunshine State is not a good-faith effort to put the public back in public universities. Indeed, it imagines that adult taxpayers are the only members of the public who count — and confuses public *accountability* with public *control*. As taxpayers, we will hold our city accountable for maintaining the local roads, but we won’t tell the construction crews what kind of asphalt to use when the potholes need fixing.

The public good is eroded when state colleges are governed by diktats that tell professors what they can and cannot teach. If legislators and political appointees are put in charge of curriculum and hiring decisions, the quality of public higher education in Florida will plummet. With state intervention in the DeSantis mold, Florida’s colleges really will be in the business of indoctrination.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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