

A Year at New College

By Bruce Gilley

It takes me about eight minutes to walk across the campus of the New College of Florida, where I just concluded a year as a visiting professor. There are rare sightings of students, a grand total of 800, who dart in and out from under the palm trees like white ibises. The clock bell on the astroturf in front of the library can be heard from the waterfront all the way to the student dorms. The all-faculty email list for the 100 or so scholars emits messages such as: “Is anyone having trouble with the Internet?”



Despite its minuscule size, the Sarasota college attracted 17 separate articles or op-eds in the *New York Times* in

2023 and hundreds more in the mainstream American media as a whole. That journalistic attention has not abated, perhaps because New College is now seen as the anti-Harvard. The *Guardian* newspaper serves up a steady [diet](#) about the right-wing horrors unfolding here. Every few weeks, another media storm arises: a heated debate in Tallahassee over the college’s budget or an over-medicated administrator exposing himself off-campus. The latest indignation is the college’s scotched plans to reclaim the architecturally integrated Ringling Museum in its midst, as well as a University of South Florida campus to the north, clear evidence of a search

for *lebensraum*.

Long-form essays of astonishing detail continue to appear. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* [weighed in](#) with 8,000 words, or 10 words for every student, in April. *Politico* is about to serve up a novella, as well. Meanwhile, the very busy American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has been churning out a steady stream of [op-eds](#), [censures](#), and [interviews](#) about what they call an “intellectual reign of terror” at New College. All hands on deck, as they say.

Make no mistake: The efforts by Florida governor Ron DeSantis to revive an intellectually moribund higher-education sector in the state, including his *reconquista* at New College, are worthy acts. But the Left’s obsessive focus on New College tells us more about the manias of the intellectual establishment than it does about the likely impact of this tiny institution—or, for that matter, about the entire 12-university state system in Florida and its 430,000 students.

To understand why, let me borrow the language of statistics. While the policy changes undertaken in Florida are *reliable* or *dependable* drivers of better outcomes in the sense of being effective means to improvement, their *magnitude* is small and is overwhelmed by other factors. In terms of a metaphor, while you can depend on the fact that an oil change will help your car move forward, having enough gas and being a competent driver matter more.

Policy shifts, in other words, are not sufficient to improve education and perpetuate a flourishing civilization. Other factors are more important, such as family and cultural norms. In the case of New College (or the entire Florida system), the policy shifts are not even complete oil changes, more like a top-up of fresh Castrol. Gainesville may actually be going backwards under its new “anti-racist” president. So why the panic?

One theory is that the Left's hysteria over Florida and New College is simply misinformed. American college campuses, including, alas, New College, are not changing anytime soon in terms of their substantive cultures or the ideas they offer. The old oil will continue to circulate for a long time to come. The baby steps achieved so far in Sarasota have required a Herculean effort, combining top-level political support, a muscular board of trustees, and a determined president and administration. All this for 800 students, and still the results are only partial. If this is a "model," then the news is not good. What kind of war room would be required to transform a larger institution?

I dearly wish that the Left's fixation with New College were justified. But academic cultures are slow to change. Faculty radicals still wield enormous influence at the college. While President Richard Corcoran shuttered a comatose gender-studies program (sample thesis: "The Female Nonwhite Dancing Body and the White Male Gaze") and has hired a few dozen scholars who actually deserve the name, the faculty remains decidedly hostile to efforts to inject intellectual diversity and professional accountability into the place.

The faculty committee, for example, is so antagonistic and dysfunctional that they could not convince anyone to stand for chair during the past year. When the long-tenured historian David Harvey eventually agreed to take on the thankless role (one he had previously held), only 30 of the faculty voted in favor, while 50 abstained and 23 voted against. Harvey is suspected of collaborationist tendencies. This is the behavior of children.

In late May, the faculty passed an illegal and pointless "resolution" against immigration enforcement on campus. It then nominated as one of the three academic division chairs a Mexican radical who has become the face of *La Resistencia* and whose scholarly record consists of nothing but campus activism.

This sends red flashing lights to any non-leftist scholar considering a career at the college, especially because DeSantis leaves office next year, and Corcoran is a politician who could be called away at any moment. In short, New College is about as likely to become a “[conservative bastion](#)” as is NPR.

The good news is that it might not matter as much as we suppose. The malign effects of that old oil in misshaping higher education may be overstated, despite the pretensions of the professoriate. Cultural reproduction now takes place largely outside of universities: in the alternative media, in churches, in sports teams, in parent groups, in the workplace, and of course in the practice of adult reading. If Florida’s higher-education sector really were “ground zero of the culture wars,” as one AAUP Bolshevik [asserted](#), then we might be more concerned about the resilient monoculture at New College. In the actual present, such a concern would be ill-informed.

Even if New College quickly became a successful model of an intellectually diverse and rigorous institution and scaled up to its planned 1,400 students and 200 faculty, it might merely be cited by the state’s professoriate as a reason to dig in elsewhere. “You have your conservatives in Sarasota,” they would assert, echoing the common fallacy that having a few token conservatives makes a place intellectually diverse.

The fact is, we just don’t know how this will play out. The safest bet is that there will *never* be any public university in the United States whose faculty is even remotely politically balanced, much less intellectually diverse. A recently released nationwide [survey](#) of faculty from 2020 showed that 40 percent described themselves as socialists, Marxists, activists, or radicals.

To be fair, many on the right may be equally ill-informed about the degree of change at New College, as well as the

possibilities. They cling to a classical ideal of campus life that is about 3,000 years out of date. Even our best students today are woefully unprepared, and becoming more so, for a serious liberal-arts education. Digital dementia is the great challenge of our time, and it is rendering discussions about syllabi frankly quaint. There is as much chance of a Socratic experience erupting in Sarasota as of fresh sulfur flares on Mount Kilimanjaro.

Not that we shouldn't try. I was part of a faculty group at New College this year that fashioned an honors track in the new general-education program known as ... um ... well ... the Socratic Experience. But the Right, including [myself](#), has as much work to do as the Left in tamping down hopes about what can be accomplished, and thus what is at stake.

A second theory for the furor over New College is that it is a form of psychological displacement. The enormous trauma on the left surrounding its unexpected loss of hegemony in American intellectual life since 2016 may have caused a redirection of those passions to soft targets such as New College. If the "Trumpocene" has gotten you down, there is nothing like a good old-fashioned campus rally to restore mental tranquility. You can even bring your own tambourine.

Again, some on the right may be engaging in similar psychological displacement reflecting frustration with the spread of woke ideology. I admit that [my last contribution](#) to the Martin Center belied such frustrations. But to rest one's hopes on a tiny liberal-arts college is like asking a moped to deliver a shipping container. Only the major vessels, such as the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Florida, have any hope of success.

This year's commencement speaker, Alan Dershowitz, declared while visiting that "American higher education can survive without Harvard. It cannot survive without New College." Actually, if New College is the extent of the *reconquista* then

the broader cause is lost. The fact that Dershowitz then used his commencement-speaker bully pulpit for an ill-conceived rant against Woke suggests that maybe the cause would be better off without New College, as well. If conservatives are so tone-deaf or egotistical that they trample on the most beautiful day in a young person's life in pursuit of change then something is wrong with this model.

Many on the right were enraged when gender theorist Judith Butler came to New College in February. But Butler will have her audience, and critical responses to her flummery, such as [mine](#), show how such events can have the opposite effects as intended "outside the room," which is where it matters. Out there, gender madness is being reversed, followed by climate madness, immigration madness, and DEI madness. This is not because the universities have become more plural places of late, quite the opposite. The professors simply don't matter as much as we thought.

What did I learn from a year at New College? Reform efforts in American higher education need to be aligned with what matters to a flourishing civilization. What *do* matter—what, in other words, remain overwhelmingly reliable *and powerful* propellants of civilization—are parenting, families, K-12 preparation, sports and business endeavors, educational norms, faith communities, work, cultural leadership, literary life, and public reverence for the past and our inherited institutions. This means that if places such as New College are to make an impact, they have to reach beyond the classroom.

One thing that some of the new Christian faculty at New College did this year was to start a C.S. Lewis Society, where we met biweekly for lunch with students, staff, faculty, and community members to discuss faith in contemporary society. The college also connected better to elite high schools in Florida, through teacher training, dual enrollment, and student debate and essay contests. New College will soon launch a masters in educational leadership to take

the *reconquista* into K-12 education. Its public-speaker series offers mostly conservative speakers to an audience in Sarasota overflowing with liberal ones. It has initiated a long overdue partnership with the local business community for internships and recruitment. It has low-level sports teams that bring energy without the farce of big-time college athletics.

These initiatives at least take aim at high-impact pathways for human betterment rather than fixating on the classroom. They depend importantly on administrative leadership that consults with but is in no way bound by the faculty. The faculty will slouch in the back seat, griping like spoiled teenagers. But with grownups at the wheel, the institution could make real progress. Writ large, that's a car that could take you places.

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First published at the [James Martin Centre](#)