

The Shadow Banning of College Courses

by Anthony David Vernon

Abstract: This short paper speaks to potentiality of universities 'shadow banning' college courses and materials. The example institution used is Florida International University. Shadow banning is the act of stealth banning contents that a given institution does not want to be widely distributed. And there is perhaps the phenomenon of DEI and so called DEI courses along with materials being shadow banned.

Florida International University (FIU), is perhaps the prime example of the 'anti-woke' academic shift. "Florida International University's Board of Trustees voted last week to drop 22 courses from the core curriculum, including Anthropology of Race & Ethnicity, Introduction to LGBTQ+ Studies, and Sociology of Gender" (Moody). This was done "to fall in line with a state law pushed for by Gov. Ron DeSantis targeting 'woke ideologies' in higher education" (Atterbury).

This cutting of courses came before Jeanette Nuñez became FIU's president, who stated, "FIU should be a place to question, seek truth, and pursue excellence. Civility is key. We must do better in allowing diverse viewpoints while maintaining respect for differing opinions" (Cabrera and Amir). Yet, Nuñez did not reinstate any of the dropped courses, and as a political appointee of Ron DeSantis, "she openly supports DeSantis and Trump ripping apart courses that relate to 'critical race theory or related concepts'" (Cuevas). So there were valid concerns she would outright drop more courses, which could be seen as 'woke'.

However, there have not been any sweeping cancellations of classes on the books. Yet, FIU faculty, alumni, staff, and students I have spoken with have spoken to me about a shadow banning of courses and a discouragement of topics. According to sources, FIU or any institution does not have to officially eliminate courses; it could use a variety of strategies to make courses null and void. Classes could stop being offered to students, despite being listed. Classes could not have faculty hired for them, despite being listed. Advisors could be told to stop recommending certain courses. Class caps could be reduced for a particular class or set of courses. Removing courses from general education requirements. Funding toward particular classes could be cut, despite there being interest. In this, we have a set of situations where courses are shadow-banned, quietly banned, or soft-dropped either outright or reduced in commonality. All of this without anything being documented.

Now I certainly cannot confirm that any of this is happening at FIU or any other institution, for that matter (thus the shadowy nature of the bans). I admittedly only have the word of advisors and others at FIU that African American studies courses and Latin American studies courses are facing shadow bans. It is upon rumor that I have come across that the social work department at FIU cannot speak to transgender and transsexual issues. So why speak to any of this?

Because none of this is out of the realm of possible strategy for higher educational institutions. Colleges and universities could wipe their slate clean of 'woke' courses without having to officially ban a single one. Or institutions could reduce the relevance of 'woke' courses to the point where they are virtually null and void. And this can be done simply on the basis that terms like 'woke' or 'DEI' have no truly agreed-upon basis. As Howard M. Wasserman, an FIU

Law Professor, put it, “the way the Trump administration or the State of Florida uses DEI and the way scholars and employers who want to diversify their workplace use those terms have nothing to do with one another” (Capote).

It is important to call out censorship of any sort and try to seek out voices that are not being heard. Admittedly, this is highly speculative, but voices are not always silenced in sweeping changes, but also in the minutiae of bureaucracy.

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