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## **Two Troubling Developments in Florida**

The University of Florida states: “Our mission is to enable our students to lead and influence the next generation and beyond for economic, cultural, and societal benefit.”

Florida’s state lawmakers are considering two regressive bills that not only run counter to that solid and longstanding mission but would take public education in the state down a dangerous path.

Florida Senate Bill 86 reduces college to an experience solely shaped and motivated by economic concerns, dismissing any opportunity for personal growth beyond those directly related to a career. Florida Senate Bill 264 invites the state government to police political views and exchanges of speech on campus, eerily echoing what one might experience on campuses run by totalitarian governments – the kind of schools thousands of students each year apply for F1 visas to the US to escape.

ACLS and the scholarly societies co-signing below stand against these proposals and the misguided view of higher education that underpins them. We strongly encourage Florida state lawmakers to vote against these bills and call on Governor Ron Dion DeSantis to decline to sign any such legislation into law.

As a nation proud to be known as “The Land of the Free,” since when do we tell people what to study, what to think and say, and what is valued in terms of intellectual curiosity? When did we become a nation so eager to stifle diversity of thought, instead of finding ways to encourage healthy, respectful debate?

Higher education broadens opportunities and helps students from all backgrounds gain knowledge, larger and more diverse networks of friends and mentors, and a richer sense of how they might lead their lives. Trying to legislate and police avenues for personal and intellectual development is destructive, preventing students from fulfilling their potential to be thoroughly prepared for the world.

The proposed changes in Senate Bill 86 to the Bright Futures Scholarship program, which benefited nearly 112,000 students in 2019-20, would essentially drive many of those students away from college. Forcing students into majors they do not wish to pursue just to be able to attend school will weaken and frustrate the future workforce, not strengthen it.

The attempt to lock a college education to specific bases of knowledge or technologies is futile in today’s rapidly changing world of work. Advanced skills in communication, analysis, and cultural understanding are key to success in many rewarding careers.

College offers more than a dollar value. For generations Americans have agreed that college has a civic purpose: to produce citizens experienced in judging truth from falsehood, engaging in respectful debate, and placing current events in historical context. The racial reckoning we have witnessed over the past year is the latest dramatic reminder of the need for democratic citizens to understand history.

Florida Senate Bill 264 would allow students to record their professors in the classroom without permission, make faculty members' political views a matter of state supervision, and hands the state the power to decide who speaks publicly on campus. Such wide-ranging legislation sets a worrying precedent and puts thousands of scholars in history, culture, philosophy, art, and other fields of public interest at risk of losing the freedoms to pursue topics of their choice and to help open their students' minds to our complicated world. Introducing a culture of recordings, surveys, and other interventions would be antithetical to fostering a true free exchange of views.

We are organizations devoted to the advancement of the humanities and social sciences, areas of study focused on understanding the human experience. We believe the proposed legislation will place these vital fields and the scholars active in them at heightened risk. They foreshadow a world in which students are not invited or encouraged to think, debate, imagine, or dream – all key elements to innovation and democracy. Such campuses would no longer be destinations for top faculty or students and would represent a sad example of lost potential in America.