



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE  
*Guest Columnist*

## I was Florida's professor of the year, but my classes would now be illegal

It would have been impossible to teach my courses on human rights, hunger and ethics without including a discussion of the consequences of structural and institutional racism.



Gov. Ron DeSantis addresses the crowd before publicly signing HB 7, the "Individual Freedom Act," also dubbed the "Stop WOKE" bill during a news conference at Mater Academy Charter Middle/High School in Hialeah Gardens in April 2022. [ DANIEL A. VARELA | AP ]

In 2006 I was honored to be selected as the Florida Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The award is specifically designed to recognize excellence in undergraduate teaching and mentoring.

Yet today my courses are illegal under Florida's "Individual Freedom Act," also known as the "Stop WOKE Act." This law is intended to prevent discussions of the ways in which racism is ingrained in America's laws and power structures. The law effectively bans classroom examinations of institutional or structural racism. Professors are prohibited from making students feel guilt for past discrimination.

State funding will be cut to those colleges that refuse to cancel courses that deal with racial inequality and systemic racism. Gov. Ron DeSantis and the far right don't see this as censorship or a free speech issue. They argue that the ideas are so reprehensible and wrong that they shouldn't be allowed in an academic environment. Far-right radicals claim that teaching that systematic racism exists in America is the equivalent of teaching in physics classes that the Earth is flat. In their eyes, such institutionalized racism does not exist in America. Professors who espouse these positions, according to DeSantis, are pursuing a trendy leftist ideology and are racists themselves against white people.

Before I retired in 2021, my key courses were titled "Human Rights and International Law," "Hunger, Plenty and Justice" and "Ethics and International Relations." It is impossible to teach courses on human rights, hunger, and ethics without including a discussion of the consequences of structural and institutional racism.

For example, my human rights class includes a detailed section on the mass incarceration of African American men, which I believe to be the most pressing human rights crisis confronting our country. The U.S. imprisons more of its ethnic and racial minorities than any other country in the world. This tragic situation is a result of too many young African American males caught up in a police and judiciary system that often denies them basic human dignity and rights. Many white American citizens believe that "justice is blind" and that the rules and laws

of society are applied more or less fairly with “no one above the law.” Such opinions deny either a class or racial dimension to incarceration. The legitimacy of the judicial system overall is thus not questioned by many white Americans.

But this is too facile and misleading as it ignores the impact of America’s ugly racial history on current punitive policies toward people of color and the severity and cruelty of our criminal justice system. As documented in my book “The Ethics of Interdependence,” racial and class bias in sentencing exists, and there is disproportionate policing and punitive measures directed at the poor African American community. In fact, it is only through the prism of institutional racism that it is possible to understand how it is that the United States became the leading incarcerator among the world’s democracies.

Legal equality and new social norms have, unfortunately, not created actual equality in the administration of the criminal justice system in America. Race to a large degree still determines who gets arrested and who doesn’t. Criminologists continue to document the many ways in which imprisonment is unrelated to crime. For example, a key study of New York City demonstrated that the incarceration rates were highest in the city’s poorest minority communities and not those neighborhoods where crime rates were the highest.

The importance of understanding structural racism was also central in class discussions on the right of all citizens to a quality education. The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* determined that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. Yet underfunding of property in poor African American communities, combined with exclusionary zoning laws, perpetuated segregated school districts. It is thus impossible to understand the differences in educational opportunities between the white and Black communities in 2023 without an understanding of this history of institutional racism.

A final example concerns American citizens rights to housing. After World War II, the G.I. Bill was key to helping returning veterans secure loans to buy houses. The bill significantly helped white Americans gain home ownership and prosper.

Yet, the bill was structured in such a way that it ultimately denied benefits to 1.2 million Black veterans who had bravely served our country. Many banks simply continued to refuse to approve loans to Black vets. It is thus impossible to understand the housing, eviction and homeless crisis in minority communities in 2023 without an examination of this history of institutional racism.

DeSantis clearly doesn't want our young people examining this history. In addition to the attacks on university professors, his administration recently rejected a new Advanced Placement course on African American studies for high school students. Yet DeSantis would clearly benefit from taking this AP course himself and doing his homework on African American history and institutional racism.



**William F. Felice is professor emeritus of political science at Eckerd College. He is the author of six books on human rights and international relations. He can be reached via his website at [williamfelice.com](http://williamfelice.com).**