



BY WILLIAM F. FELICE  
*Guest Columnist*

## Culture wars threaten education worldwide

Florida is arguably the center of the far-right cultural offensive against liberal education in the United States. Yet, the attacks on academic freedom are not limited to Florida. They are taking place throughout the U.S. and around the world.



Shutterstock/Times and wire file photos

Florida is arguably the center of the far-right cultural offensive against liberal education in the United States. In addition to the “Don’t Say Gay” law and the “Stop Woke Act,” Gov. Ron DeSantis has banned funding for diversity, equity and inclusion programs, proposed mandating Western Civilization courses, halted Advanced Placement courses in African American studies and battered the state’s only public liberal arts college, New College of Florida. Yet, the attacks on academic freedom are not limited to Florida. They are taking place throughout the U.S. and around the world.

PEN America, the literary advocacy organization, has documented more than 2,500 book bans issued across 32 different U.S. states during the 2021-22 school year. In addition, USA Facts reports that in 2022 six states passed laws limiting what schools can teach related to race, bias or identity.

America’s extreme cultural politics echo similar efforts of conservative parties and governments around the world. Consider the following:

In the **United Kingdom**, The Guardian reports on an emerging culture war leading to censorship and removal of books that examine institutional racism, diversity and LGBTQ identities from school libraries. As in the U.S., there appears to be a systematic attempt to stop the teaching of structural and institutional racism.

In **Canada**, right-wing organizations are petitioning to eliminate certain books and discussions from the classroom, including LGBTQ scholars and works focused on structural and institutional racism. • In Australia, the Senate voted to exclude books and discussions of institutional racism from the national curriculum. The media reported this as another example of the Australian right copying policies from the U.S. conservative media into their political process.

In **Turkey**, inspiring stories of women in history have been banned. “Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls,” which sold over a million copies, was partially banned and treated like pornography. A Turkish government board on obscene publications stated: “Some of the writings in the book will have a detrimental influence on the minds of those under the age of 18.” The book can only be sold to adults and must be concealed from view in bookstores.

In **Brazil**, right-wing parties have campaigned against “gender ideology,” creating a “chilling effect” in teachers’ willingness to discuss these subjects in the classroom. Human Rights Watch has documented at least 21 laws directly or indirectly banning gender and sexuality education as of May 2022.

In **Russia**, in December 2022 Vladimir Putin signed into law a ban on LGBTQ “propaganda,” which made it illegal to promote same-sex relationships or suggest that non-heterosexual orientations were “normal.” The ban applies to the internet media, books, audiovisual services, cinema and advertising.

And perhaps most dramatically, the **Hungarian government** of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has instilled a “moral traditionalism” in the country’s academic centers. Echoing Donald Trump and DeSantis, the prime minister is anti-immigration and opposes multiculturalism. Orbán is a hero to many conservatives in Europe and the U.S.

At Orbán’s urging the Hungarian parliament in 2021 transferred control of 11 state universities to new quasi-public foundations. This structure gives the administration more control over the Hungarian education system and allows Orbán to push the academy to follow his ideological agenda. Orbán’s moral conservatism is based on the perceived need to demographically “keep Hungary Hungarian” and protect the “Christian heritage” of Hungarian culture. The education system is now centered on teaching about the “dangers” of “different cultures coexisting.” Orbán has packed like-minded conservative thinkers to the new university foundation boards effectively gaining ideological control over these universities.

The Hungarian government has also revoked accreditation and funding for gender studies at universities, enacted laws banning discussion on LGBTQ issues, ended legal gender recognition for transgender and intersex people, amended the constitution to define marriage as a heterosexual union, which functionally prohibits same-sex adoption.

The actions of Hungary, and multiple governments around the world, to legislate that certain ideas and concepts are illegal in public education is a dangerous threat to free speech, academic freedom and democracy itself. The use of state power to exert ideological control over public educational institutions is a hallmark of

authoritarianism, not democracy. Furthermore, attempts to silence race and gender-based critiques of history in countries around the world threatens the basic human rights of minorities and the LGBTQ community. Academic freedom, institutional autonomy and democracy are fundamentally linked.

Legislation designed to suppress classroom discussions of specific intellectual frameworks is the opposite of a democratic commitment to open and free debate and discussion. The response to disagreements, as PEN America points out, “can never be to ban discussion of ideas or facts simply because they are contested or cause discomfort.” The attempts by conservative cultural warriors around the world to use state power to stifle discussion of racial discrimination, gender and LGBTQ issues must be overruled.



**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).**