

DeSantis's makeover of 'left-wing' Florida college has been costly

The small Florida public college overhauled by the state's governor has added athletic teams and a new mascot, along with a change in its philosophy.

November 19, 2025

Nearly three years ago, as Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis championed his culture-war policies during the run-up to a bid for the White House, he vowed to overhaul a small, quirky liberal arts college in Sarasota that was part of the state education system.

New College of Florida was “more into DEI, CRT, the gender ideology,” the Republican governor said, using abbreviations for diversity, equity and inclusion and for critical race theory. He added: “We’re going to be able to offer some reforms.”

DeSantis has largely [succeeded in transforming](#) what was one of the most liberal institutions in the state into a school that is now hailed by conservatives across the country. He handpicked a new president and appointed a board of trustees who fired and denied tenure to veteran professors. The school closed its gender studies center. It added sports teams and turned classrooms in a historic campus building into donor-friendly spaces with cigar smoking allowed on the balcony overlooking Sarasota Bay.

Now the bill for that effort has arrived, and it shows a remarkably high price. According to a [report](#) released this month by the Florida Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), the cost to produce a degree at New College is \$494,715 — the highest among public colleges in Florida and more than three times the \$150,729 cost at the state’s flagship school, the University of Florida.

Operating expenses at New College are \$83,207 per student, compared with \$45,765 at UF. New College also has the largest number of administrators per student, or 33.3 per 100, compared with 26.9 at UF, a school with nearly 62,000 students.

Enrollment has increased since the overhaul, but with 732 current students, New College is still short of the school’s stated goal of 1,200. More than a third of the new students are athletes recruited to fill recently created collegiate sports teams, including baseball, basketball and softball.

Enrollment has increased since the overhaul, but with 732 current students, New College is still short of the school’s stated goal of 1,200. More than a third of the new students are athletes recruited to fill recently created collegiate sports teams, including baseball, basketball and softball.

DeSantis and his supporters say the New College makeover, along with the governor’s other education policies, should provide a road map for education leaders nationwide.

“New College of Florida, under President [Richard] Corcoran’s leadership and at the direction of Governor DeSantis, has structurally changed its mission from a liberal arts school rife with left-wing indoctrination into a classical liberal arts college with an emphasis on truth in academics, civic education, and academic freedom,” Ted Veerman, DeSantis’s deputy press secretary, said in an emailed response to questions about the Florida DOGE report findings.

One of the new trustees DeSantis appointed was [Christopher Rufo](#), the conservative activist who has led campaigns against critical race theory and gender identity in schools and has advised DeSantis on education policy.

“Florida has become the blueprint for red-state governance,” Rufo wrote in an introduction to a 2024 book Corcoran wrote about his early tenure at the school. Its title: “Storming the Ivory Tower: How a Florida College Became Ground Zero in the Struggle to Take Back Our Campuses.” But critics say the spending at the new New College far exceeds what should be expected from a change in curriculum.

“I don’t think people appreciate how obscene the levels of spending are,” said Nathan Allen, who was vice president of strategy and special projects at New College until October 2024.

The state legislature approved \$52.7 million in additional funding for New College soon after [DeSantis appointed six new college trustees](#) in early 2023, the most ever provided in the school’s history. It has added more than \$20 million since then.

“What New College needed wasn’t more money; it needed good management,” Allen, who graduated from the school in 1995, said in an interview. “But it’s a wholly political project.”

Democrats in the state legislature said spending at the school needs to be scrutinized.

“I knew this was a top-down directive from the governor, so I’m not surprised to see that we’re spending so much money on this college,” said Lori Berman, the Democratic leader in the Florida Senate and a member of the higher education committee. “I’m disappointed that we’re not getting results from it.”

The school had long been an anomaly in Florida’s sprawling higher education system. It was small, with an enrollment that hovered around 600. New College emphasized individualized, “student-directed” learning and didn’t issue grades.

It was founded in 1960 as a private college and built on waterfront property that once belonged to circus magnate Charles Ringling. Ringling’s elegant marble mansion is the campus showpiece. Famed architect I.M. Pei was selected to design the campus. To symbolize the aspirations of the school’s founders, dirt from Harvard University was brought in and mixed with soil at New College as it was being built.

It’s the state’s only designated residential honors college and at one point produced more Fulbright Scholars per capita than any other Florida school.

It didn't have a sports program other than intramural teams, but it did have an unofficial mascot: [the null set](#), which reflected the brainy and iconoclastic student body.

New College was frequently on the brink of closing because of financial struggles. But when DeSantis said the school needed an overhaul, he stressed ideology more than money.

The offices of both DeSantis and Corcoran blame high expenses on the way the old New College was run.

"Righting these wrongs has always been expected to take some time, especially with a new administration, new principles, and a complete academic overhaul," DeSantis spokesman Veerman said.

The DeSantis administration pledged to model New College after Hillsdale College, a private Christian school in Michigan. New College adopted what it calls a "classical" curriculum centered on the Western canon. Freshmen are required to take a class on Homer's "Odyssey."

Attorney Alan Dershowitz, a staunch supporter of President Donald Trump, spoke at New College's commencement in May. Corcoran announced in September that the school is commissioning a statue of slain conservative activist Charlie Kirk for the campus, to be funded by public donations.

New College also volunteered to be the first to sign [Trump's "Compact,"](#) an offer by the administration to colleges and universities for preferential treatment in federal funding decisions in exchange for compliance with his ideological priorities.

Corcoran said New College is already undertaking those priorities. He called the Florida DOGE audit "ridiculous" at a Nov. 12 faculty meeting. Corcoran, who was the Florida education commissioner in DeSantis's first term, became one of the highest-paid public officials in the state when he was named to lead New College in 2023, with salary and benefits up to \$1.3 million.

The DeSantis-appointed trustees fired the former president, Patricia Okker, as one of their first actions in January 2023. Okker was paid about \$353,000.

Corcoran told faculty, "you can't measure us until 2028," according to an audio recording of the meeting obtained by The Washington Post.

In an [op-ed](#) published Tuesday, Corcoran said most of the spending since the overhaul has been "used to repair decades of catastrophic neglect we inherited" that included moldy dorms and historic mansions that were "in ruin."

"New College wasn't struggling; it was in a death spiral," he wrote.

"The school's spirit, once nationally recognized for rigor and intellectual independence, had become so dysfunctional that it was described as 'toxic,'" Corcoran added.

New College has dropped 60 places in the U.S. News & World Report Rankings since the overhaul, to 135th among national liberal arts colleges. While the annual list has been criticized for valuing wealth and prestige, most colleges still tout high rankings when they get them, and DeSantis has frequently celebrated high rankings of Florida universities.

In a separate [op-ed last month](#), Corcoran said the rankings' formula "punishes reform."

"For decades, the same universities that built bloated bureaucracies and ideological echo chambers have graded each other on a curve — rewarding peers who protect the status quo and punishing any institution brave enough to change," he wrote.

Students at New College say they're adapting to the changes. Galen Ryzdik, who graduated in January, saw both versions of the school. He said the old New College had a vibrant student body and top-notch professors.

Ryzdik, who earned a joint degree in applied math and quantitative economics and a separate degree in music, now teaches high school geometry in Florida. He said the overtly political messaging from Corcoran and others when the overhaul began seemed "antagonistic."

"I think the students thought, to a large degree, that their voices were not being heard and that the direction was changing in a way that they didn't want," Ryzdik said. "For myself, I was a little bit frustrated that we had a public university that had very political messaging."