

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Why Is Stanley Fish Teaching at Florida's New College?

An interview about politics, academic freedom, and "ideological odor."



BRIAN SMITH FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW



THE REVIEW | CONVERSATION

By *Len Gutkin*

NOVEMBER 15, 2023

**S**tanley Fish is in the last phase of his storied career as a Renaissance scholar, law professor, and college administrator. “I’m still here,” he told me. “And as of yesterday, still playing basketball.” He’s also still teaching — a course on Milton, his early area of scholarly expertise, and a course on “How to Write a Sentence.” He’s especially excited about the course on Milton, whom he hasn’t taught in 20 years.

Both courses will be at New College of Florida, the small public liberal-arts college at the center of the conservative overhaul — or takeover — of the state’s college system by the right-wing activist Christopher Rufo and Gov. Ron DeSantis. Rufo, who has been appointed to New College’s board of trustees, described his infiltration of the institution this way: “We are over the walls, and ready to transform higher education from within.”

I wanted to know how Fish, who has written a series of important books about the law and theory of academic freedom, felt about New College’s new direction. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Given how controversial New College is, why do you want to teach there now?**

Well, the simple nitty gritty reason is that I’m 85 years old, and someone who asks me to teach courses is a godsend. So I responded affirmatively.

**Do you worry at all that, given that something like a [third](#) of faculty members have left New College following the new administration, you’ll be taken to be making a statement about New College or about DeSantis?**

Taken by whom?

**Observers in academe who might feel that your prominence as a scholar and an administrator is being used to ratify the political project that New College has become.**

Yeah, I can see that as a possible way of viewing this appointment. But such matters go under the general category of consequences that I can neither predict nor control. What I can control is the kind of teaching I do, and of course I wouldn't want to get engaged in a classroom experience if I felt that that classroom was being monitored for political or ideological reasons. But I've had no hint of any such monitoring in my discussions.

The kinds of courses that I offered seemed congenial to the administrators — it was the kind of course that they hoped to see taught, especially the Milton course. And I felt equipped to teach that course after a lifetime of reading and commenting on Milton.

**I have a lot more to ask about New College. But first I wanted to ask about [Ralston College](#), in Savannah, Ga., which you've been involved with at the planning stage, and which seems to promise a kind of great books or neotraditional education.**

It took about a decade of fundraising and planning and gift-giving for the college to begin but it's now in operation. I was there less than a year ago, giving a lecture and talking to students and faculty members. I gave a talk about hate speech and free speech. And the morning before the talk, I attended a class on Homer, the *Iliad*. What was amazing about it was that not only was the *Iliad* being read in the original Greek, but the conversations between the students and the faculty member were being conducted in Greek. And six months before this course began, no student in it — and there were about 25 — had any knowledge whatsoever of the Greek language or Greek culture.

So that itself is an amazing piece of evidence. One might call it a piece of testimony.

**It seems almost impossible.**

Not that I was able to participate! I wish I could. I took a little Greek 110 years ago and have long since forgotten it, but it was inspiring. These people were thoroughly engaged.

**I took Greek as an undergrad. It took me three years to be able to laboriously translate, with a crib, over the course of an hour, maybe a page of Homer. I was by no means the world's best Greek student. But there were other students with more talent in the class — at least one of them went on to become a professor of classics — but none of them could have conducted a discussion in Greek about the *Iliad*.**

Yes, that's right. And the discussion was very precise about details of the verse and how it worked, and how various words interacted with one another or were opposed to one another.

**How did you know, if it was in Greek?**

Oh, I could tell that much. There's a certain kind of gesturing with respect to texts that is known to any of us who have worked with texts for a while.

**So Ralston is granting degrees, or what's its status?**

It's granting certificates of some kind. And they're refurbishing buildings that were donated to them. And they're planning a lot more courses, although they want to continue to have a rather small student body, and a program dedicated to the old-fashioned humanistic study of texts and philosophies and histories, without the intrusion — or at least that is the hope — of political or ideological pressures.

**That neotraditionalist orientation seems to be part of DeSantis's plan for New College, too. Is that part of what attracted you? A lot of academics, including people who are quite conservative about the canon, feel that the new New College is more of a threat**

**than a way forward.**

I've read some of the essays in *The Chronicle* and elsewhere, and I would have to talk to some of those faculty members who left, to see to what extent their leaving was voluntary. I don't know. This may be a case where I'm just putting on blinders, and if I were responsible I'd be taking a closer and more critical look.

But as far as I am concerned, I'm going to go in, I'm going to teach my classes, I'm going to interact with the faculty — because I'm a company man, always have been. I like to go to all the lectures and the discussion groups and have lunches with faculty members and so forth.

And if there are times in which these hot button issues are discussed, I hope that I would be asked to participate in it. And I would participate in it, and not tailor my views, which I couldn't possibly do anyway because they've been in print for many years, on issues like academic freedom or critical race theory or the other hot button matters that come up.

**On the portion of the Florida state website devoted to New College, DeSantis [says](#) that the new administration is hoping for “the replacement of far-left faculty with new professors aligned with the university’s mission.” How do you feel about this posture toward higher ed?**

I would have to know whether or not those observations by DeSantis and others he's made in speeches translated into something specific about the way New College is being administered, classes are being taught, discussions are being convened. After a little while there, I would be in a better position to answer your question. But if the idea is to replace ideological left-leaning academics with ideological right-leaning academics, then I'm not your boy.

It's been my mission, notably unsuccessful, for many years to make people understand that academic work, including in your writing and in your classes, is one thing and political work is another, and that the two should not be confused nor should they be intermingled. You can

have any number of political issues brought into the classroom so long as they are brought into the classroom as objects of analysis or description and not as agendas either to be embraced or rejected. That's what I've been arguing, one might even say preaching, for a long time.

I too, like I assume DeSantis and others associated with him, I don't want my classroom, or any classroom in a college or university that I'm teaching in, to be thought of as the vehicle of some program or agenda, no matter how virtuous it might be. Virtue is not the business of the academy. You can see why that stance might be attractive to people who were alarmed by their vision of the takeover of the classroom by the quote-unquote woke faction.

**DeSantis is also associated with the so-called Stop WOKE Act, which has direct implications for academic freedom. There was a court [injunction](#) against it on First and 14th Amendment grounds that was [upheld](#) by the 11th Circuit for now. You have a famously minimalist definition of academic freedom — “Academics are not free in any special sense to do anything but their jobs,” as you write in *Versions of Academic Freedom*.**

Minimalist and correct.

**But the Stop WOKE Act seems to many not to meet the criteria even of that minimalist definition, in that faculty members feel that the autonomy they need to develop curricula according to their own lights is being potentially [denied](#) them.**

I would have to have the DeSantis road map or guiding plan in front of me. But I can perhaps answer your question by referencing an example. That is critical race theory. Should critical race theory be taught? The answer to that question is yes, if by “taught” you mean “taught about.” The distinction is between teaching something as if it were gospel and teaching about something as if it were an academic object of attention like any other.

**The concern, as I understand it, is that laws like the Stop WOKE Act are written so broadly that they indeed risk chilling the ability to “teach about.”**

If that were the case, I would be critical of it. Anything can be brought into the classroom for discussion, so long as it’s made the object of academic, analytical attention rather than the object of political persuasion.

**At New College, Trustee Chris Rufo early on announced his intention to eliminate the institution’s gender-studies program.**

The question you want to ask is, Is the study of gender an important or significant part of the intellectual scene in the past number of years? The answer to that seems incontrovertibly to be yes.

**“If the idea is to replace ideological left-leaning academics with ideological right-leaning academics, then I’m not your boy.”**

Now that doesn’t mean that you *have* to have a gender-studies program. New College is a very small college. The number of programs or courses that it can offer is limited. And therefore it’s possible that one could say, We’re not going to put our resources in gender studies, we’re going to put our resources somewhere else, for pedagogical reasons. Not for reasons of the ideological dismissal of an entire branch of inquiry.

**One of the trustees, Matthew Spalding, [called](#) gender studies “ideologically driven and tendentious.”**

That could be, that could be. I’ve never been. But I’ll tell you a story. When I was a dean at the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, I helped implement and inaugurate the first Native American-studies program at the University of

Illinois. And I spoke at the inaugural luncheon. What I told them was, “It is without doubt the case that activism of a variety of kinds is what brought you to this point.” There wouldn’t now be a Native American-studies program at UIC if activists of a polemical kind weren’t working toward that end. “Now I want you,” I said, “to forget the history that brought you here, because now that you’re part of a university setting, you’re no longer activists, you’re academics. If you become or continue to be activists, the academics in the university will have a derisory view of you.”

So I told them at the moment of their triumph — it was probably impolite of me to do so — “Don’t continue doing what you did in order to get here, because where you’ve gotten is a particular kind of place, and you now have to play the rules of the game of this particular kind of place.”

**I think one can agree with all of that and still worry that the distinction between “teaching” and “teaching about” is too firm. I’ll give you some examples from your own career. You were instrumental in building the Duke English department to which you brought Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the great queer theorists, whose work, as she said, was always geared toward “anti-homophobic inquiry.” And you used to co-edit a book series with the great Marxist critic Fredric Jameson. Aren’t these scholars, by methodological necessity, teaching from a very specific ideological point of view?**

I’m not as sure of that as you are. I’ll speak more about Jameson than of Eve. I was a close colleague of Jameson for a number of years. What Fred was most concerned about was making sure that there were strong language exams in place for graduate programs. That’s what he talked about! Fred and also Eve were traditionally trained academics. In Fred’s case, that was the ruling ethos that motivated his concerns and his actions. As far as I can tell there was never a whiff of Marxist ideological training coming out of his department.

He also hired Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a noted theorist of poetry. And Janice Radway, who wrote one of the earliest books of cultural history about women’s book clubs. And Frank



Lentricchia, who was a somewhat conservative academic of the old school who once whispered in my ear at a cocktail party. “Stanley, all I care about is lyric poetry.”

There was no ideological odor emanating from the English department in those days.

**It’s implausible to me that a dissertation student studying with, say, Judith Butler or Fredric Jameson is not, by definition, imbibing methods that are politically normative but also very valuable. A lot of critical traditions, in gender studies or in Marxian literary criticism — or in say, Straussian political theory — are entwined with normative political or ideological commitments. There’s no way to expel those commitments from a vibrant department of the humanities.**

Well, you don’t have to expel them. The question you have to ask is, Are they primary in the minds of those who are teaching in the classrooms? If we’re in a community that has a certain set of standards and modes of operation, what we want to do is be faithful to those standards and modes of operation. And if now and then those deeper commitments kind of seep through, well, yes, that’s inevitable. But that’s quite different from having an ideologically centered classroom.

**I want to end by asking an unfair question.**

Oh good.

**First, how old were you when you came to Duke?**

Close to 50.

**Let’s say you were going to New College now, and that instead of 85, you were 50.**

I like the premise of the question.

**Do you think you would be able to bring people like Jameson or Sedgwick, for instance, to that college and build there in the way you built at Duke?**

I really can't answer that question until I see what the lay of the land is. But in general, my answer to that question would be, Yes. It's always been my inclination — and as it turned out, skill — to persuade people operating at the highest levels of intellectual work to join me in a project. I remember my friend and former colleague Walter Benn Michaels, at the time that the Duke English department was getting going, said to me, “At this point, whenever I see an academic with a pondering look on his or her face, I assume that he or she is considering an offer from Duke.”

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

TEACHING & LEARNING

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

[Len Gutkin](#)

Len Gutkin is a senior editor at *The Chronicle Review* and the author of *Dandyism: Forming Fiction From Modernism to the Present* (Virginia). Follow him at [@GutkinLen](#).



1255 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037  
© 2023 The Chronicle of Higher Education