

Opinion: I'm a scholar at New College. Here's what the haters and con artists won't admit.



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The recent guest column on these pages by the former chair of the New College of Florida Board of Trustees, Mary Ruiz, is the latest example of former NCF leaders trying to cover up their crime scene with indictments of the first responders.

Before reviewing Ruiz's contribution, let's recap earlier entries in this quest for exculpation by the miscreants.

They include a guest column by former Board Trustee Brian Cody, who also previously served as a board member of the New College Foundation. Cody was probably more responsible than any other individual for the foundation's past operational deficit, and his guest column was an attempt to indict the clean-up efforts.

Cody was ably rebutted by Sydney Gruters, the current New College Foundation executive director and the person brought in to clean up his mess. Gruters rebutted Cody's claims point by point and explained how – for the first time ever – the foundation is being run in a business-like manner.

“What kind of university president declares war on his own university's foundation?” Cody asked in his guest column. Perhaps a president whose foundation is wasting rather than raising money.

Avoiding honest discussion

Then there was the guest column by Felice Schulaner, who formerly chaired both the trustees' board and the New College Foundation. Among other things, Schulaner claimed that an essay I wrote comparing the research metrics of New College faculty with those at comparable Haverford College was an attempt “to demean the achievements of established NCF professors.”

If Schulaner considers honest discussion about how to improve faculty research as “demeaning,” then the problems before 2023 were even worse than I thought.

As I noted in my essay, the most outspoken faculty critics of New College's transformation – including humanities professors Amy Reid and Sarah Hernandez – are the same ones whose research records are so abysmal.

Even the Herald-Tribune's opinion columnist, Carrie Seidman, weighed in with a series of pearl-clutching complaints about an alleged “attack on decency.”

This included a claim that the five students who used the "heckler's veto" to shout down New College of Florida's 2024 commencement speaker were engaged in “protest.” Apparently, Seidman's education did not introduce her to the concepts of time, place and manner.

Then there is Kathleen Coty, a former board trustee who is now a member of the gadfly NCF Freedom group. That group is headed by one of those research-challenged, former faculty members – and an individual who, on these pages, wrongly accused New College of lacking a master plan.

For her part Coty weighed in to complain that New College President Richard Corcoran, who previously served as Florida's education commissioner, “lacked meaningful experience working in higher education.”

That is like complaining that Elon Musk “lacked meaningful experience working in Detroit” before launching Tesla.

Beg pardon, but that is the point.

Homeopathic healers, glassblowers

So there is a pattern to all of the critics' complaints: an evil lord has darkened the land and undone the bountiful past – and hope lies in returning to former times. But the sense of entitlement to what Seidman called “our peacefully diverse community” of old is immense.

These assorted homeopathic healers, glassblowers and antiques dealers of the *ancien regime* all appeal to some lost paradise where endemic mismanagement was considered “quirky,” to use Seidman’s term.

"La Nouvelle Université, c’est moi!" they yell.

Actually, it’s not. It belongs to the people of Florida and to their elected representatives. They have taken back power.

Ruiz’s guest column followed this predictable pattern and dramatic structure.

According to Ruiz, President Corcoran has darkened the land by admitting more students, including athletes, who lack 4.0 high school grade point averages. The result, according to Ruiz, will be a lower-ranked school operating at a higher expense while attaining lower graduation rates – especially in the state's areas for strategic emphasis.

By contrast, according to Ruiz, the college had high-performing students in the past. And the future, according to Ruiz, requires returning to the past.

All nonsense.

False, deceptive

The proportion of entering students with a 4.0 or higher high school GPA during the five years prior to the 2024-25 incoming class was 44%. Ruiz

simply cherry-picked a single outlier year of 55% in 2022-23, a figure that was juiced nationally by pandemic-era grade inflation.

In contrast, and even with the expansion of the student body, 41% of New College's incoming class of 2024-25 had a GPA at 4.0 or higher – and Corcoran has proposed raising that to 49% by 2028-29.

Where's the regress?

Corcoran's plan for graduation rates aims to boost the average 56% rate achieved by the previous five cohorts to 60% for the class than began this year.

In her guest column, Ruiz cherry-picked one high graduation rate cohort of 2018 (58%), and then adds a pie-in-the-sky target of 67% that was set by the previous administration – but never achieved – to claim that Corcoran is lowering standards.

It is false and deceptive.

Meanwhile, the proportion of graduates in the state's areas of strategic emphasis was 55% in 2022-23 (not 2023-24 as Ruiz wrote). That proportion will fall to 30% this year – and rise to 39% by 2027-28 –because a blanket inclusion of all STEM programs in the old list was replaced this year by a more limited one.

Moreover, most of the social sciences and humanities programs that define the liberal arts as taught at New College will never qualify. Is Ruiz suggesting that New College should teach “Hospice and Palliative Care” or “Homeland Security”?

New College is a start-up

Regarding Ruiz's claims about higher costs, the bottom line is that when a small-scale college is undergoing rapid expansion, per-student costs will be higher than elsewhere.

During hearings in September, members of the Florida Board of Governors rightly compared New College to a start-up, where cash burn initially exceeds cash flow. This tells us nothing about whether the start-up will succeed; it only tells us that it is making the effort to do so.

As for ratings, the multiple and varied media rankings for colleges are next to useless – as my New College colleague Bruce Abramson has shown – given their differing and flawed methodologies.

Like all colleges, New College will trumpet high rankings and ignore low ones.

That is good marketing.

But the only valid measure of a college's performance is student return-on-investment above predictions 5, 10 and 20 years out.

The New College of old performed badly on those metrics.

We eagerly await the results of the new regime.

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