

RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
THURSDAY, JANUARY 2, 2025

Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Onward, Dr. Jewell!

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 01.02.25



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It is fitting, and no small cause for celebration in American higher education, that Jason Jewell — a scholar whose intellectual fingerprints mark over two decades of humanities leadership at Montgomery’s Faulkner University — has been tapped as the inaugural chief academic officer of Florida’s state university system.

At Faulkner, Jewell crafted a legacy steeped in the Great Books tradition, shepherding graduate and undergraduate programs that champion the enduring relevance of classical texts in our digital age. His stewardship of online humanities doctoral and master’s programs since 2015 suggests an administrator who understands timeless wisdom and contemporary pedagogical imperatives.

“I am grateful for Faulkner University,” Jewell tells me, “which has given me many opportunities to grow as a teacher, scholar, and administrator. It has been a joy to work with so many tremendous colleagues and students for so long.”

That Florida’s Chancellor Ray Rodrigues and the Board of Trustees have selected such a figure — one who has demonstrated both scholarly gravitas and administrative acumen — signals their seriousness about intellectual rigor in an era when many universities mistake trendiness for transformation. Jewell’s elevation to this newly created position comes as Florida’s higher education system, like the republic itself, grapples with fundamental questions about the purpose and promise of liberal learning.

Florida has undertaken ambitious reforms to reshape its state university system, focusing on classical education and traditional academic values. The state leadership has committed substantial funding, including over [\\$34 million for the New College of Florida](#), which has already seen record enrollment under new leadership. The reforms aim to strengthen academic rigor and emphasize the study of Western civilization, economics, and foundational American principles.

“Florida is the number one state for education in America,” Jewell says. “It is also where the most significant reforms in higher education are taking place.”

The state is taking steps to streamline administrative processes, including restructuring the accreditation system to promote institutional flexibility. Universities are encouraged to focus resources on core academic programs and teaching excellence. New College of Florida, in particular, is being repositioned as a classical liberal arts institution in the tradition of respected academic institutions.

The changes include regular reviews of tenured professors to ensure ongoing academic productivity and alignment with institutional goals. The state also works to make higher education more fiscally efficient by evaluating program spending and administrative costs across the university system.

The Hamilton Institute at the University of Florida stands as a notable advancement in classical education, while Florida State University is developing its own civics center with similar aspirations. Both initiatives aim to reinvigorate traditional liberal arts education and reaffirm the fundamental purpose of university learning: the pursuit of truth through rigorous scholarly inquiry rather than ideological conformity. These centers represent concrete steps toward restoring state flagships' historic mission of fostering intellectual discourse and preparing students for thoughtful citizenship.

All these reforms, taken together, represent a significant effort to refocus Florida's higher education system on academic excellence, intellectual diversity, and the enduring principles of liberal arts education while maintaining the state's position as a leader in affordable, high-quality public education.

At long last, a governor, Ron DeSantis, has mustered the fortitude to confront the regime of mandatory diversity that has colonized our universities. Florida's legislation, which he championed, strikes at the heart of the administrative apparatus that has long masqueraded progressive ideology as an academic necessity.

Florida has drawn a line in the sand by cutting off public funds for DEI bureaucracies and dismantling academic programs built on calumnies against America's founding principles. No longer will tax dollars subsidize the fiction that our republic is irredeemably stained by systemic oppression — a narrative crafted precisely to undermine the legitimacy of our constitutional order.

The legislation followed a thorough review of DEI expenditures, with Florida universities reporting nearly \$35 million spent on such initiatives, including \$8.7 million at the University of South Florida alone. (Of course, Alabama has enacted similar anti-DEI measures).

The DeSantis administration also requested detailed information about gender-affirming healthcare provided at state universities, including data on treatments such as puberty blockers and hormone therapies, though it explicitly prohibits the collection of personally identifiable information.

These efforts extend beyond higher education. The Heritage Foundation, where I'm a visiting fellow, has ranked Florida #1 in Education Freedom for three consecutive years at the K-12 level.

As Alabama contemplates its gubernatorial contest in 2026, we citizens would do well to consider Florida's example. Jewell's departure should remind us that the cultural headwinds buffeting higher education require more than rhetorical gestures. They demand a governor who combines intellectual seriousness with political courage.

For too long, conservatives have treated universities as lost causes, while progressives have treated them as conquered territory. Florida's precedent suggests a third way: methodical reform that reasserts the primacy of genuine liberal learning.

Alabama's next governor must understand that a state's universities shape more than classroom syllabi: they influence the intellectual atmosphere in which citizens breathe, businesses operate, and culture evolves.

The 2026 election race will arrive amid continuing national debates about higher education's role and function. Alabama voters should demand a candidate who grasps the mechanics of governance and the civilizational stakes of university reform.

After all, what happens in faculty lounges rarely stays there; it eventually finds expression in every institution that matters to Alabama's future.

Congratulations, Dr. Jewell. May your leadership light the way for a renaissance in higher education, where timeless truths meet the needs of the modern age.

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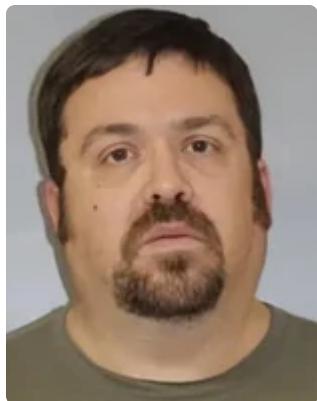
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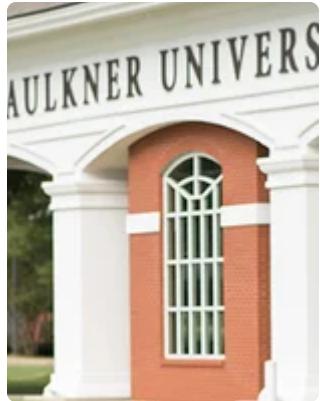
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