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SUNDAY, MARCH 9, 2025

Opinion

# Allen Mendenhall: The university reckoning

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 03.08.25



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In Florida, a commonwealth of considerable conservative experimentation, Gov. Ron DeSantis has executed what can only be described as an intellectual insurgency within the state's pedagogical archipelago. He has installed five individuals on the University of West Florida's governing conclave whose pedigrees suggest a familiarity with principles preceding the progressive capture of America's higher education citadels. My friends Adam Kissel, Gates Garcia and Scott Yenor are among those appointed.

This move follows a similar insertion of conservative intelligentsia into the governance structure of New College of Florida: Christopher Rufo, Matthew Spalding, Charles Kesler and Mark Bauerlein.

Florida's institutions of higher learning may soon experience what the progressive professoriate will undoubtedly characterize as a reactionary reconquest. More discerning observers will recognize this as a restoration of intellectual pluralism in a landscape long dominated by a stultifying leftwing orthodoxy.

This prompts a question for Alabama and our ecosystem of publicly subsidized universities: What administrative, constitutional or legislative means might replicate Florida's nascent academic renaissance? We possess neither Florida's population density nor its electoral significance, but we harbor sufficient conservative legislative supermajorities to pursue similar curricular realignments and leadership renovations.

Among the institutional renovations that might invigorate Alabama's educational apparatus is a reconsideration of the mechanics by which university trustees are appointed. In December, I advanced a potential constitutional amendment to reconstitute the University of Alabama System's Board of Trustees – a body that currently perpetuates itself through internal selection, largely insulated from external superintendence.

There's no compelling rationale why this proposed constitutional remedy should not be extended beyond the University of Alabama's tripartite domain to encompass all public university governing bodies within the state. Indeed, limiting such reforms to a single institutional constellation would be an exercise in half-measures, allowing other academic fiefdoms to continue operating as autonomous principalities rather than stewards of public resources and trust.

Here's what such a constitutional amendment might look like:

*Proposed Amendment to the Constitution of Alabama  
Relating to the Governance of Public Colleges and Universities*

*(a) Notwithstanding any provision of this Constitution or law to the contrary, the governing boards of trustees of all state public colleges and universities, including community colleges, shall be composed as provided herein.*

*(b) Each board of trustees shall consist of sixteen (16) members, including:*

*(1) One (1) member from each congressional district of the state, as those districts are constituted at the time of appointment;*

*(2) Eight (8) at-large members, up to four of whom may reside outside the State of Alabama but within the United States of America; and*

*(3) The Governor, who shall serve ex officio as a full voting member.*

*(c) Members of each board of trustees shall be appointed by the Governor and shall be subject to confirmation by a majority vote of the Senate of the Alabama Legislature.*

*(d) Trustees shall serve terms of four (4) years. No trustee shall serve consecutive terms, and no trustee shall serve more than three (3) terms in their lifetime.*

*(e) To facilitate the transition to this system, all trustees serving at the time of this amendment's passage shall continue to serve out the remainder of their original terms.*

*However, no trustee serving at the time of passage may serve beyond three (3) full academic years after the effective date of this amendment.*

*(f) The Legislature shall enact laws to ensure that trustee appointments following the expiration of current terms are staggered. To achieve this, the Legislature may provide that some initial appointments under this amendment be for less than a full four-year term, with such variations in term length explicitly limited to the transition period.*

*(g) Vacancies occurring before the expiration of a term shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointment and shall be for the unexpired portion of the term.*

*(h) The Legislature may enact laws necessary to implement this amendment, provided that no such law shall alter the composition, appointment process, or term limits established herein, except as expressly authorized for the transition period.*

*(i) This amendment shall become effective on the first day of the fiscal year following its ratification.*

This is a mere schematic – a bare blueprint lacking ornamentation but providing the essential structural elements upon which more elaborate features might later be imposed. Yet this preliminary sketch immediately presents several constitutional and political questions.

The proposal's central innovation – inserting gubernatorial authority directly into the academic governance apparatus – simultaneously constitutes its most promising feature and potentially fatal flaw. While it replicates DeSantis' model, which has yielded such promising intellectual diversification in Florida's academic environment, it also demands of Alabama's chief executive a willingness to immerse himself in the contentious micropolitics of university administration.

This immersion may prove unappealing to governors who, calculating the political dividends of such entanglements, might conclude that the political costs outweigh the educational benefits. The reform thus risks encountering resistance from the very executive whose authority it seeks to enhance – a resistance that might manifest as either overt opposition or quiet bureaucratic obstruction.

Nevertheless, the proposal's virtues should not be dismissed. It imposes temporal limitations on trustee tenure, thereby preventing the calcification of governing fiefdoms. It subjects appointments to senatorial scrutiny. And it provides for the staggered introduction of new trustees, ensuring institutional continuity amid governance transformation.

While this framework may not represent the apotheosis of academic governance reform, it constitutes a meaningful departure from the current arrangements that insulate trustees from the public whose interests they nominally serve. Perfection in institutional design, like perfection in most human endeavors, remains elusive. The relevant question is whether this reform or some variation thereof advances us toward a governance structure more aligned with conservative principles of accountability and intellectual pluralism.

I believe it would – even if the political path to its implementation remains strewn with considerable obstacles.

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