

RISE TO THE MOMENT OF TRUTH
SUNDAY, JANUARY 26, 2025

Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: What Florida's bold experiment could mean for Montevallo

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 01.25.25



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It's no secret that too many American universities have become wellsprings of intellectual conformity rather than crucibles of critical thought. Richard Corcoran, president of the New College of Florida offers commentary and testimony about this sad reality in his book "Storming the Ivory Tower."

Corcoran recounts the audacious project to reclaim the New College of Florida from what he and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis saw as the ideological monoculture of contemporary academia. Wielding both attorney's precision and reformer's passion, Corcoran argues that academic fashions have obscured "the power and beauty of a liberal arts education." He submits that "the purpose of the liberal arts is to force us to think critically: to have perspective, to be aware of long-term consequences, to look beyond ourselves and at a larger picture."

DeSantis initiated a fundamental restructuring of the New College of Florida by installing a fresh cohort of conservative trustees. Five of New College's 13 trustees are prominent conservative intellectuals: Mark Bauerlein, Ryan T. Anderson, Charles Kesler, Christopher Rufo, and Matthew Spalding. The new leadership has moved swiftly, denying tenure to five professors and terminating several staff members, including librarian Helene Gold.

This transformation of a small Florida college represents a significant skirmish in the larger battle over American higher education. Corcoran envisions a liberal arts institution facilitating "open dialogue and civil discourse, free from indoctrination," not merely as an academic ideal but as "a powerful legacy to leave for future generations."

Whether this experiment in educational restoration will succeed remains to be seen, but Corcoran's account of the attempt merits attention from anyone concerned with the future of American intellectual life.

Could a similar experiment unfold here in Alabama? The question is both provocative and timely, particularly given the parallels between the New College of Florida and the University of Montevallo.

Montevallo, with its intimate size, liberal arts mission, and historic commitment to fostering critical thinking, shares much in common with its Floridian counterpart. As Alabama's only public liberal arts university, it might be the ideal place to spark a similar reclamation – a movement to reassert the core principles of a proper liberal arts education: intellectual diversity, rigorous inquiry, and open dialogue.

In Montevallo, as in Sarasota, the stakes would be high. But so, too, would the potential rewards: a university that could serve as a model for the state and the nation, demonstrating what it means to cultivate well-formed (not just well-informed) minds.

The path to reviving Montevallo's liberal arts tradition, however, runs straight into a governance structure engineered for inertia. While Florida's New College operates under a nimble system of five-year trustee terms, Montevallo's board members serve for 12 years, with terms staggered in thirds.

The contrasts are telling. Florida empowers its governor and Board of Governors to appoint trustees directly, creating clear lines of accountability. Montevallo's system, meanwhile, requires gubernatorial appointments to satisfy congressional district quotas and at-large positions while accommodating *ex officio* members (including the governor, state superintendent of education, and a student representative).

This arrangement poses a particular challenge for reform. Any governor hoping to reorient Montevallo toward academic excellence must identify trustees committed to intellectual rigor rather than institutional maintenance and watch these appointments slowly filter through a system that changes at geological speed.

The arithmetic is sobering: With trustees serving terms longer than three presidential administrations, the wheels of reform turn with deliberate sluggishness. While Florida can reshape its college governance within a single gubernatorial term, Montevallo's transformation would require the kind of sustained attention span that modern politics rarely rewards.

On the other hand, this institutional torpor that might frustrate reformers could serve as a bulwark against passing fashions in academic governance. The slow pace of trustee rotation creates a kind of constitutional brake against sudden ideological swerves. After all, if one camp can seize control of university governance so swiftly, the same could just as easily happen in the opposite direction.

Montevallo's reformation requires, at any rate, neither revolution nor timidity. While the wholesale transformation achieved in Florida may exceed our immediate reach, the path forward remains clear if demanding.

Alabama needs not an extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime crusader but a diligent, dutiful and hardworking governor who grasps that universities require both nourishment and pruning.

Among his or her most consequential duties would be the appointment of trustees – not just at Montevallo but across Alabama’s public institutions – who understand that stewardship means more than passive acquiescence to faculty and academic drift.

These trustees must combine intellectual depth with principled conviction, understanding their university’s essential mission and the current deviations from it. The goal is neither purge nor capitulation but rather the steady restoration of academic standards and institutional integrity.

The governance of universities like Montevallo demands the wisdom to distinguish between essential change and mere fashion, necessary reform and destructive upheaval. Trustees who grasp this distinction – and have the fortitude to act upon it – could emerge as momentous architects of institutional renewal.

And they could make Montevallo great.

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