

Midnight Watch for Rogue Waves: Experiencing Faculty Intimidation in Florida

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Abstract: In a 2023 emergency investigation, the American Association of University Professors reported: “What is unfolding in Florida is horrifying. It should serve as a cautionary tale to all in higher education.” Highlights of cascading events in Florida public higher education include elimination of tenure, keyword searches upon faculty syllabi, course removals from Common Core, elimination of references to Diversity-Equity-Inclusion, union-busting legislation, and mandated accreditation shopping. In this context, my general question is this: How does intimidation affect faculty experience in Florida’s public universities? My specific question is this: How is intimidation lived by me? I have written extensively about college teaching as an educational helping relationship and see this conceptual essay as central to the work of professional helping. Joining other first responders’ scholarly writings on the Florida emergency, this essay puts a personal face on the currently raging ideological war in American higher education and the encompassing American culture.

Keywords: higher education, Florida, political interference, identity and stereotype threat, intimidation

I am a sailor. At sea, we keep solo watch—two hours on, two hours off—all night. Gigantic waves, called rogue waves or killer waves, can appear without warning. One such wave in the North Sea, the Draupner Wave, was recorded at 84 feet in 1995. Most of the buildings in Paris are not that high. Surviving a mountain of water, cresting into a wall, collapsing on top of you, is unlikely. In addition, we watch for metal icebergs called containers. We have radar, but wave action blocks low profile objects such as these enormous steel boxes, 10 thousand of which fall overboard from mammoth freighters every year and float the currents. If we hit one, we sink, most likely. On night watch, you fight fatigue and try to stay vigilant for what could appear suddenly from the dark— something abrupt, unpredictable, fatal.

Recently, I have meditated on Erving Goffman’s (1963) classic, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. I do so because I am suddenly managing a stigmatized identity: I am a scholar in Florida. Nearly overnight, with a changing political context, my scholarly behavior, which has not changed, has transformed from exemplary to law-breaking. Simply doing my job seems dangerous. I feel as if I am at sea, at night, on watch.

This conceptual essay explores intimidation personally. The context comprises faculty conditions in Florida’s public universities amidst extreme political interference. In an emergency investigation, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP, 2023) reported: “What is unfolding in Florida is horrifying. It should serve as a cautionary tale to all in higher education” (p. 31). This discussion is grounded in experience, research, and theory. I write in the spirit of autoethnography and participant observation. I utilize abductive reasoning when I generalize—that is, I connect my experience and larger patterns. The general question is this: How does intimidation affect faculty experience in Florida’s public universities? The

intimate question is this: How is intimidation lived by me? I exercise what C. Wright Mills (1959) called the *sociological imagination*, connecting person and society, biography and history, agency and structure. I try to connect the dots, while adding new dots. Experience roots my discussion. When my discussion connects to the scholarly literature, it is fundamentally interdisciplinary. This essay covers ground in probing intimidation autoethnographically. Concepts discussed include academic freedom, scholarly identity, the “woke professor” stereotype, authenticity, identity and stereotype threat, imagined and real contingencies, concealing and disclosing stigmatized identities, and pathogenic policy.

This conceptual exploration joins other first responders’ scholarly work on the Florida emergency (e.g., Adams, 2024; Barsky et al., 2025; Batker & Turpin, 2023; Carr & Yousfi, 2024; Goodman, 2024; Green, 2023; Groton et al., 2023; Gupton & O’Sullivan, 2024; Guy & Moore, 2023; Hampson, 2023; Hutchens & Miller, 2023; Johnson et al., 2024; Kamola, 2024; Majewska & Feeder, 2022; Moody, 2024; PEN America, 2024; Rainwater, 2024; Robertson, 2025; Russell-Brown, 2023, 2024; Schoorman, 2024; Schoorman & Gatens, 2023, 2025; Taylor & Somers, 2021; Thornhill, 2023; Topalidis & Austin, 2023; Turner Roberts, 2024; Watson, 2023; Zelnick et al., 2023). What this essay adds to this emergency scholarly response is a conceptual and experiential discussion of the personal impact on faculty of intimidation by the State through the lens of one of those faculty—me.

Positionality

I am a white, cisgender, heterosexual male of Scottish heritage who made the developmental transition from childhood to adulthood in the 1960s and early 1970s in a small mill town in Oregon. I grew up working class, and I am a first-generation college graduate. I am a tenured full professor of higher education at Florida International University (2008–present). I served in senior university leadership as University Undergraduate Dean from 2008 to 2016. In 1968, when I was 18, I could not vote (the 26th Amendment, setting the voting age at 18, was ratified July 1, 1971). In 1968, a military draft existed. Although considered too young to vote, I could be required to kill people in Vietnam. As popularly repeated in the years following, 1968’s American deaths in Vietnam averaged 46 a day. Body counts were reported each night on the evening news. Post-traumatic stress syndrome was an unnamed, undiagnosed epidemic. On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. On June 6, 1968, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated. In 1968, my uncle had a decal next to his front door: “America, love it or leave it.” He had a bumper sticker, too. In 1968, riots erupted in over 100 American cities. In 1968, American society shook violently with disequilibrium. In 1968, in this socio-historical-geographical context, I graduated from high school as valedictorian and began my uninterrupted 56-year career in higher education as a student, professor, and administrator, a career that continues now in Florida.

Florida Public Higher Education

The point I want to make clearly is that Florida’s public higher education environment, as I experience it, is saturated with threat cues regarding my scholarly identity. As I construe my

colleagues' perceptions, I believe that my experience, although uniquely mine, represents in important ways the experience of many faculty colleagues in Florida's public colleges and universities. Nonetheless, I anchor my observations in my own experience so as to avoid the appearance of projection.

Florida's threat environment is significantly expressed in the laws and policies emanating from DeSantis' Stop WOKE agenda, beginning in 2021, and continuing as I write this essay. For example, recently, my university's faculty were notified that a second university-wide keyword search of faculty syllabi was being conducted on a separate issue from the first. Flagged syllabi and professors would undergo examination by an ad hoc review committee. Let me pause a moment to let that sink in... keyword searches of syllabi... interrogations of flagged syllabi and professors by ad hoc committees. The practice was outrageous the first time, and now it is being normalized. Chief United States District Judge Mark E. Walker, Northern District of Florida, called the State's approach "positively dystopian" in his formal ruling against the State (*Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System*; *Novoa v. Diaz*, 2022). Justice Walker began his preliminary injunction by quoting George Orwell's (1949) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen," [p. 1] and the powers in charge of Florida's public university system have declared the State has unfettered authority to muzzle its professors in the name of "freedom." (*Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System*, 2022, p. 1)

I have co-authored a chapter with Black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks (hooks & Robertson, 2007), whose work has been singled out with animus by the State. I am alert to this keyword search surveillance. I abhor giving energy to this vigilance. Survival instincts divert my attention to my work.

The content and implementation of the Stop WOKE laws and policies are noteworthy, but also vitally important is the process by which they are produced. The threat is always in my face. The pattern goes as follows: A shockingly repressive bill is introduced in the Florida legislature. The governor has national political ambitions and gives repeated speeches and press conferences touting the legislation and his Stop WOKE agenda. Faculty talk about the legislation. Media cover it. Revisions occur over months back and forth in committees. Politicians talk about it. Media cover it. The bill finally passes; the governor signs it; and it becomes a statute. Media cover it. Faculty talk about it. State universities are administered by the Florida State University System (SUS) Board of Governors (BOG), each governor and the BOG chancellor being appointed by the governor, as are essentially the presidents and trustees of each of the 12 SUS universities. The BOG issues directives that implement the statute. University boards of trustees and administrators interpret and issue the directives at each university. Deans and chairs follow suit. At each step in this process, terror rekindles. Then a new year comes, and a new legislative session begins. Legislation is implemented as new legislation goes through the process of becoming law, which will in turn be implemented. Cycles upon cycles of anxiety and intimidation build, year by year.

As a tenured full professor in a Florida public metropolitan Research I university, the nation's largest Hispanic Serving Institution, I must emphasize that the four examples below of political interference in my work environment are merely illustrative, not exhaustive (not even close):

- Tenure has essentially been eliminated, as has faculty peer review, progressive discipline, due process, appeal, and arbitration in annual faculty evaluations. Every five years, administrators decide tenured faculty's fate without appeal. Immediate termination of tenured faculty is now real. Without tenure, academic freedom functionally ends.
- By law, students can secretly record classes without permission of the faculty or other students as evidence for civil and criminal charges against faculty regarding students' ability to say whatever they want with or without factual support; possible financial penalties for faculty are \$200,000, plus court costs (CS/CS/HB 233: Postsecondary Education, 2021).
- All expenditures are prohibited for any offices, administrators, faculty, curriculum, co-curricular programs, initiatives, and so forth that support diversity, equity, and inclusion or critical race theory. An audit has been conducted by the State.
- The State formally declared in a 2022 legal argument that faculty are "government employees" whose instruction is "pure government speech, not the speech of the educators themselves" and that "curriculum is set by the university in accordance with the strictures and guidance of the State's elected officials" (*Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors of the State University System*, 2022, pp. 10–11).

An entire paper could be devoted to describing the dramatic changes in the Florida public higher education environment since 2021. However, my point is that Florida's public higher education environment, as I experience it, is saturated with threat cues regarding my identity as a scholar.

Identity

Identity may be a simple idea: the answer to the question "Who am I?" However, identity is a dizzying reality. The answer to the question "Who am I?" is utterly contextual, it seems to me. I inhabit many contexts, each with the potential to highlight a different identity or aspect of my identity. The question is perhaps more properly asked, "Who am I in this situation?"

Having said all that, an important exception exists. I have a special set of self-awarenesses called in the literature my *true self*, a self that I view as foundational and enduring across contexts (Strohming et al., 2017; Zhang & Alicke, 2021). Authenticity comes into play (Bailey & Iyengar, 2023; Guenther et al., 2024; Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Sedikides & Schlegel, 2024). Being able to be my true self, my authentic self, has high value (Slepian & Jacoby-Senhor, 2021). I just want to be me.

If my identity in a specific context is vulnerable to stigma, I may choose to conceal it. The same goes for my true self. If my context involves fundamental survival, such as my workplace, the

stakes are high. My choice of presented identity becomes even more difficult. I read the environment for threat cues. My *imagined* identity contingencies are as powerful as any *real* contingencies (e.g., Carroll, 1978; Gregory et al., 1982; Sherman et al., 1985).

The costs of concealing stigmatized identities can be extreme. The cost of disclosing can be equally severe. My dilemma of whether to disclose or conceal takes a toll from deliberating and fretting even before I pay my decision's cost. Simply being, merely existing, amidst these dynamics, is tortuous not effortless. I find myself reading Erving Goffman (1959) again, this time his first seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. I will develop further these issues of identity within the context of being faculty in Florida amidst extreme political interference.

Scholarly Identity

A person's unique developmental path unfolds within evolving socio-historical contexts—change within change in vertically and horizontally organized, interconnected, dynamical systems (Erikson, 1978; Robertson, 1988, 2017, 2023a). Generational differences, in addition to individual differences, surely exist with regard to scholarly identity. The higher education context, in which my scholarly identity has evolved, itself has changed over my 56 years as a student, professor, and administrator.

I chose to become a professional scholar in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when public university missions focused on serving the common good *and* economic development simultaneously (Geiger, 2023; St. John et al., 2018).

Now universities exist within a paradigm of neoliberalism and academic capitalism (Hall, 2016; Hamilton & Nielsen, 2021; Harvey, 2005; Kezar et al., 2019; Rhoades, 2023; Schleck, 2022; Schrecker, 2010; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Steger & Roy, 2010; St. John et al., 2018). American universities focus on economic development primarily, with lip service for social welfare (Geiger, 2023; St. John et al., 2018).

In my lifespan, it matters with regard to the developmental period in which I formed my initial scholarly identity (in my case, in young adulthood transitioning from adolescence, as opposed to, for instance, in middle adulthood as a second career). Also significant is the socio-historical period in which I initially constructed my scholarly identity (in my case, in the 1960s amidst Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War Movements in contrast to, for example, in the Great Recession following the 2008 economic collapse).

Scholarly identity (in the literature, also called academic identity) has been approached from a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Acker & Armenti, 2004; Barrow et al., 2022; Bauman, 1996; Beck & Young, 2005; Burrows, 2012; Clegg, 2008; Davies, 2005; Gill, 2010; Harris, 2005; Henkel, 2005; Lee & Boud, 2003; Sparkes, 2007; Winter, 2009). In particular, important research has addressed how the evolution of the neoliberal university and academic capitalism has recontextualized our scholarly identities and has changed some scholarly identities from

being favored to being disfavored, from being relevant to being irrelevant, and from being rewarded to being unrewarded (Beck & Young, 2005; Billot, 2010; Burrows, 2012; byrd & Siddiqui, 2025; Covarrubias, 2024; Filippakou, 2023; McDonald et al., 2021; Pick et al., 2017).

Certain values and purposes have anchored my scholarly identity from the beginning. These specific core values and purposes are what are under attack now. To me, being a scholar is a vocation, or calling, rather than merely a job. Simply put, my *raison d'être* as a scholar is to create knowledge for the benefit of the common good and to facilitate the development of critical thinking in students. The State's political interference makes it dangerous for me to follow my calling—a foundational purpose of my life. I experience the State's political interference as an existential threat—with possible consequences being termination of employment and meaning.

An important aspect of my experience is the speed of the attack on my scholarly identity—a *blitzkrieg*, it seems. At my university, tenure was being removed slowly, quietly, dying by multitudinous little cuts over years, perhaps decades, not months. A primary cutting instrument was FIU's Resource Reallocation Policy that was instituted in 2015 (Robertson, 2019, 2020, 2022, 2023b; Robertson & Pelaez, 2016, 2018; Robertson et al., 2025). According to this policy, when a permanent faculty position is vacated, the funding for that line goes to the Provost's Office to be reallocated. A maximum of 50% of the funding can be returned to the department. This simple mechanism has reduced tenured lines dramatically in less than 10 years. In terms of appointment type, the ratio of full-time Permanent (tenured and tenure-earning) to full-time Contingent (nontenure track) has fallen from 2:1 to 1:1, with Contingent now being the slim majority (Robertson, 2022, 2023b; Robertson et al., 2025).

At research universities, such as my university, policy often requires tenure for faculty who chair doctoral committees, chair departments, evaluate faculty annually, and chair or serve on promotion and tenure committees. Without sufficient Permanent (tenured, tenure-earning) faculty, universities have changed policy to eliminate the tenure requirement and pass the work to Contingent faculty, or at least, FIU has done so. I have documented that these kinds of policies with these kinds of results have cumulative, unintended, negative consequences (Robertson, 2020).

Gary Rhoades, who with Sheila Slaughter, helped to establish the concept of *academic capitalism* (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), observes, "at the core of academic capitalism are managerial practices that involve enhanced managerial capacity [and] growing contingent employment of academic workers" (Rhoades, 2023, p. 525). Professors are academic workers in academic capitalism. In this perspective, which is dominant in American higher education, tenured professors are academic workers who are relatively expensive and difficult to control. In academic capitalism, restructuring of management, labor, and their relations is required. Brimming with impatience, the Florida legislature precipitously eliminated tenure (as we know it) by statute. The brazen speed of functionally terminating tenure shocked me. I was prepared for the slow death of my conception of the scholar but not for its assassination right before my eyes.

Central to my construction of my scholarly identity is the concept of academic freedom for which tenure is the functional bodyguard (AAUP, 2015, 2023; Ceglie & Thompson, 2021; Davies, 2005; Johnson et al., 2024; Kiwan, 2024; Reichman, 2021; Schleck, 2022; Schrecker, 2010; Scott, 2019; Whittington, 2024). Academic freedom is not free speech, although the two constructs are related. To me, academic freedom describes a necessary working condition for being a professional scholar. As a scholar, I select problems to study that I perceive to have significance to society. Then I try my best to solve those problems without fear or favor. I am held accountable to suitable standards of scholarship by various communities of my peers. What I have just described is not radical. It is a position that is at the core of over 100 years of struggle, advocacy, and litigation in the United States (AAUP, 2015; Finkelstein et al., 2016; Sun, 2023; Thelin, 2011). However, this way of seeing my work as a scholar contrasts radically with neoliberal logic where the public university is a market-regulated corporation and faculty are academic labor who engage in government speech overseen by elected officials. I realize that this sentence sounds exaggerated, but I am using the language I see at use by the government itself (Florida statutes and State attorneys' legal motions).

Why it matters how I see academic freedom is because the intimidation that this conceptual essay addresses relies on the threat of punishing the exercise of my academic freedom. Next semester at the time of writing, I am teaching a graduate capstone course, *Contemporary Issues in Higher Education*. I just sent the title of the textbook to the Provost's Office, as mandated by the State. Keywords searches of syllabi have become normalized. Survival thoughts interfere with my scholarly thoughts. This threat climate itself is a contemporary issue in higher education. I struggle with how to address the topic of a chilly climate while in that same chilly climate. I see my PhD students in higher education, many of whom are already administrators at FIU, change their dissertation topics because of possible negative impacts on their careers. The same challenge occurs in my research. I write about selected contemporary issues in higher education—take this essay, for example. To me, this scholarship contributes, when amplified, to the continuing development of the promising but highly imperfect American democracy. As in my teaching, I research intimidation while being intimidated. The dynamic is twisted and debilitating. Similarly, with my service, speaking out in meetings about the concerns that I raise in this essay brings possible costs. I self-police. I see my colleagues self-police. In *On Tyranny*, Timothy Snyder (2017) calls it “anticipatory obedience” (p. 18).

Tenure protections have been eliminated. These facts of my experience show why academic freedom is crucial for me to live my scholarly identity openly and for fulfilling a fundamental purpose in my life. The political interference in Florida strikes me at that existential depth.

Identity and Stereotype Threat

I am particularly interested in understanding the individual's experience. Helping to improve the quality of the individual's experience has fundamental importance to me. I cannot do that without understanding the individual's context and the interconnection of person and environment. I recommend engaging the thinking of Gregory Bateson on this topic—the *ecology of mind* as he has called it (Bateson, 1972, 1979). Bateson's philosophical perspective is

sweeping in its pan-disciplinary applications (in Bateson's case, anthropology, biology, psychiatry, cybernetics, urban planning, mammalian communication, systems theory, epistemology, linguistics). This conception of individual experience extends my mind beyond the mere envelope of my skin to include my relations with my environments. In these terms, what is happening in my Florida university is a part of my mind.

Connecting individual experience and social context is not a radical nor novel perspective. Social psychologist Claude Steele (2010) has made this connection in developing his theory of identity threat, which I find useful with regard to understanding faculty intimidation. Steele's theory is often also known as *stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which addresses conditions in which I perceive that my identity is vulnerable to being assigned to a stereotype operant in my environment. In my case, I believe that my scholarly identity is vulnerable to being stereotyped as a "woke professor," which in my immediate work environments is a dangerous identification. Steele's theory has resonated broadly, which I think comments on its validity and utility. In a systematic literature review of twenty years of stereotype threat research (1995–2015), Pennington et al. (2016) describe the theory's impact as follows:

Over the past two decades, stereotype threat has become one of the most widely researched topics in social psychology. ... Steele and Aronson's original article has gathered approximately 5,000 citations and has been referred to as a "modern classic." (p. 1)

This theory argues that I have characteristics in mind with which to view myself. In a context, if one of those characteristics is threatened, that characteristic rises to the surface and dominates my identity and attention. For example, prior to Stop WOKE legislation and policy, being a scholar is not something that I thought about much. I just did my scholarship—focusing on solving my scholarly problems and on helping students to think critically. However, now that I perceive that being a scholar has dangerous implications, I navigate my work contexts with my scholarly identity top of mind. On a daily basis, I struggle with enacting my scholarly identity without committing professional suicide. My environment is saturated with threats to the "woke professor" stereotype. I find myself particularly sensitive to being stereotyped in that way. I routinely begin my courses, presentations, and writing with a positional introduction of myself, as I did in this essay. My experience and behavior—as a person and as a professional scholar—is shaped importantly by my perspective. I have a position—a vantage—from which I view something that may be different from the vantage from which another person views that same thing. I believe that a principle of good scholarly practice is to be as aware as possible of my perspective and its influence on my scholarship. I encourage students to do the same. Now, in the current circumstances in Florida, I am aware that my principle of good practice—my positional introduction—is a trigger for the negative stereotype of the "woke professor."

Costs of Concealing and Disclosing Identity

In the classic book-length conceptual essay *Stigma*, Erving Goffman (1963) succinctly focuses the issue of deciding to disclose or to conceal stigmatized identity:

The issue is not that of managing tension generated during social contacts, but rather that of managing information about his failing [his stigmatized identity]. To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where. ... It is... the management of undisclosed discrediting information about self, that I am focusing on in these notes, in brief, “passing.” (p. 43)

Exposing or hiding a concealable stigmatized identity (such as being a scholar in Florida who believes in and practices academic freedom)—both have potential costs. The literature documents costs of disclosing or concealing my stigmatized scholarly identity in the workplace that are predictable: emotional, physical, social, professional, and so forth.

Importantly, no safe play exists. When I have a stigmatized identity, I lose both ways—concealing or disclosing. That point needs underscoring. The situation—where I lose both ways—is a double-bind. I recognize the double-bind and suffer from that recognition. Then carrying that suffering, I choose (often situation by situation) to disclose or conceal and suffer from that choice. This kind of stress from both the framing of the decision and from the decision itself is pathogenic (Bateson et al., 1956; Watzlawick et al., 1967). What seems particularly devious is that observers, such as federal judges, AAUP officials, and Florida faculty, believe that in the political interference in Florida’s higher education the pathogenic double-bind is intentional and meant to debilitate, tame, and control faculty, or push them to leave.

Intimidation through scholarly identity threat that creates what appears to be intentional double-binding choices of disclosure or concealment—both with negative consequences—makes for exhausting midnight watches—two hours on, two hours off—looking for huge rogue waves that can kill ... and for snakes on the boat.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can imagine a colleague saying, “This essay is a White male cisgender heterosexual tenured full professor—and a former dean, to boot—describing the loss of something that I never had and articulating the personal impact of identity threats that I experience every day.” To which I say, I agree. The question is, what are we, individually and collectively, going to do about it? We still have choices, I believe.

Being oppressed means the absence of choices.

—bell hooks (1952 – 2021)

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