

April 8, 2025

New College of Florida, Board of Trustees  
(By E-mail)

**Re: Five Pressing Issues Facing New College of Florida**

Dear Trustees:

In view of your dedication to New College, I write to report on issues that I see as acute and as essential to the College's future. I am a 2009 graduate of the College, and I draw on my experience very closely observing the College since 2019, when I joined the Alumni Association Board. I served on the Alumni Association Board since then, and as Chair of the Alumni Association from July, 2023 until March, 2025, when I resigned from all roles related to the Alumni Association. Since 2019, I regularly had conversations with senior administrators, including four Presidents of New College (including one who served only in an interim capacity), read the College's institutional research and reports of consultants, spoke with faculty, involved alumni, and student government leaders, and followed outside reporting on the College such as in U.S. News & World Report.

In my view, certain issues have metastasized to the point that your active awareness and intervention is required. As Trustees, you have a responsibility to "provide administrative oversight of and in a manner dedicated to the university's mission."<sup>1</sup> Your role includes the "exercise [of] fiduciary oversight of university operations and finances," and you have a "fiduciary duty to pursue the interests of the institution." Finally, you have a responsibility to address and report "waste, fraud, or financial mismanagement" with "reasonable diligence and prudence."<sup>2</sup>

I ask that you interpret what follows in light of the College's "distinctive mission as the residential liberal arts honors college of the State of Florida,"<sup>3</sup> with its goals "to be the best liberal arts college in America," and to pursue "academic excellence."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> State University System of Florida, Board of Governors, Trustee Training (Slide 9), available at <https://www.flbog.edu/trustees/trustee-orientations/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* (slides 9, 17 and 55); *see also* State University System of Florida, Board of Governors, Trustee Handbook p. 50, available at <https://www.flbog.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Trustee-Handbook-December-2023.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Florida Statutes § 1004.32(1).

<sup>4</sup> New College of Florida, Mission & Values, <https://www.ncf.edu/about/mission-values/>.

There are five essential issues, each of them acute. I do not profess to have answers to these questions, but believe them to be existential for the institution. I see you alone as having the necessary instrumentalities to address them, as well as being where the buck stops in terms of responsibility.

Most importantly, the College has not solved the critical lack of direction in its recruitment and admissions operation, a problem that relates to the College's core identity and strategic vision. Second, there is an opacity to the finances of the New College Foundation which cripples its performance in its long-term role as a fundraiser and supporting buttress for the College. Third, the College's efficiency from a fiscal perspective is so questionable and poorly understood that, without reform, the College has no plausible long-term role in Florida's system of public higher education. Fourth, there is a fundamental lack of mission control which shows up in the failure to establish coherent academic tracks and in students' academic statistics, which are now lower, on average, than at any other public honors college in Florida and at any other institution, public or private, that we would like to call a peer. Fifth, there is stagnation of core physical projects—I mean most especially the College's need to construct new dormitories, without which it cannot maintain the character of a liberal arts college.

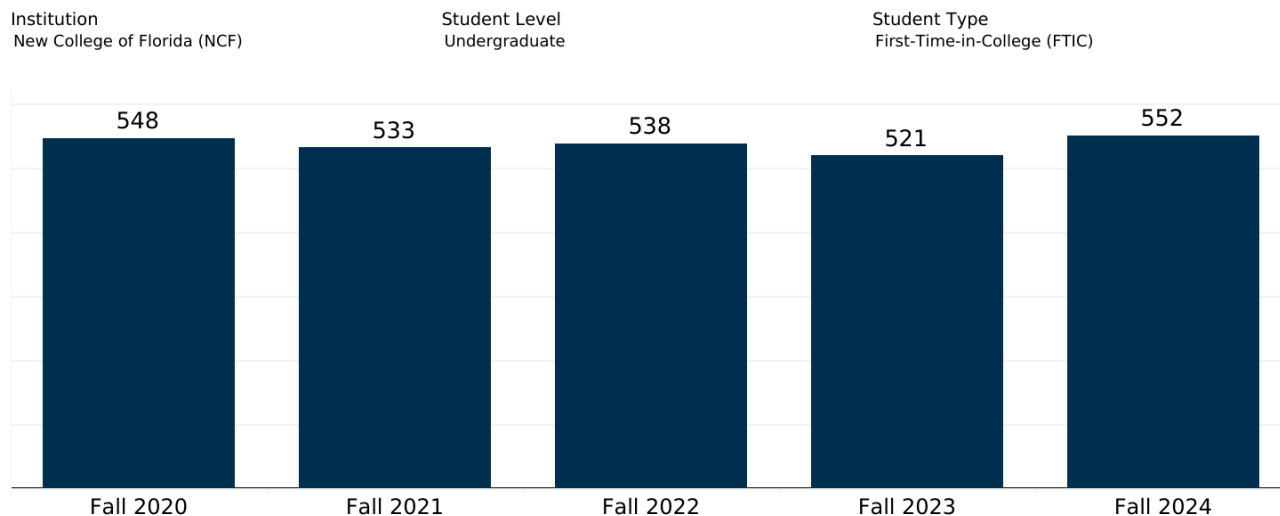
### **1. Recruitment & Admissions – Ongoing Crisis and Lack of Direction**

The most important fact about the College's admissions operation is that it is not effective. Under current operations, the marginal cost of recruiting each student is very high, but we see only modest stabilization of enrollment and a rapidly falling standard of academic qualification for attendance at the College. The admissions office is producing a student body that puts us out of competition with every other public honors college in the state, in terms of its academic preparedness.

The failure of admissions operations can be seen by isolating First Time in College (“FTIC”) enrollment, revealing a picture of complete stagnation:

[ Figure on next page ]

Headcount enrollment at: **New College of Florida (NCF)**  
Student Level: **Undergraduate**; Student Type: **First-Time-in-College (FTIC)**



Notes: Chart shows the number of students enrolled by student type categories. These headcounts only include those students who were seeking a degree – unclassified students (e.g., dual enrolled) are not included. The student type for undergraduates is based on the ‘Type of Student at Most Recent Admission’. The first-time-in-college (FTIC) student was admitted in the same fall term or in the preceding summer term, including those who were re-admitted as FTICs.

*Chart generated using tool offered by the State University System Board of Governors at <https://www.flbog.edu/resources/data-analytics/dashboards/headcount-enrollment-by-student-type/>*

For the decade prior to the new administration, the current FTIC student enrollment is lower than all years other than the pandemic years.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, what modest stabilization and gains in enrollment the administration has achieved come at the heavy cost of funding students’ tuition through scholarships and dramatically compromising on the academic qualifications for the College.

Today, we confront all-time low standardized test scores for New College’s students (all-time: since the College’s founding). When it comes to its new students’ academic preparedness,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> State University System Board of Governors, Headcount Enrollment by Student Type, <https://www.flbog.edu/resources/data-analytics/dashboards/headcount-enrollment-by-student-type/>. Current FTIC undergraduate enrollment, per Board of Governors: 552. Average 2013-2023: 650.

<sup>6</sup> Consistent with its founding vision, New College has historically made room for some students who do not have traditional indicia of high academic preparedness (e.g., high secondary school GPAs or standardized test scores), but who have other extraordinary signs of potential. By no

New College has stopped keeping pace with any of the other honors college programs in Florida. We must also inquire whether current students' SAT and ACT scores – already at an all-time low – include the substantial number of transfer students. According to the College's Institutional Research dataset, those test score averages do not include transfer students. As Trustees, you are entitled to and in need of the full and detailed data on this subject.

<i>Average Standardized Test Scores among Student Bodies Public Honors College Programs in Florida<sup>7</sup></i>		
<b>Institution</b>	<b>Avg. SAT Score</b>	<b>Avg. ACT Score</b>
University of Florida	1510	34
Florida State University	1480	33
University of Central Florida	1460	32
University of South Florida	1380	31
New College of Florida (2018)	1320	29
Florida Atlantic University	1290	29
Florida International University	1230*	26*
Florida Gulf Coast University	1220*	25*
Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University	1200*	27*
University of West Florida	1200*	25*
University of North Florida	1200 <sup>†</sup>	26 <sup>†</sup>
<b>New College of Florida (2024)</b>	<b>1140</b>	<b>23</b>

means do I oppose this practice. However, these relatively few, unique cases have never had a big impact on the story told by high-level statistical information.

<sup>7</sup> These data were found on the respective institutions' websites, as follows: University of Florida, <https://www.honors.ufl.edu/admissions/first-year-honors-program-fhp-admissions/>; Florida State University, <https://honors.fsu.edu/sites/g/files/upcbnu561/files/University%20Honors/University%20Honors%20FAQs-08.24.2020.pdf>; University of Central Florida, <https://www.ucf.edu/admissions/undergraduate/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/02/Honors.pdf>; University of South Florida, <https://www.usf.edu/honors/prospective-students/first-time-in-college-admissions.aspx>; New College of Florida (2018), <https://www.ncf.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/2018-2019-Fact-Book-Updated-09.01.21.pdf>; Florida Atlantic University, <https://www.fau.edu/honors/future-students/admissions/>; Florida International University, <https://honors.fiu.edu/admissions/first-year/>; Florida Gulf Coast University, <https://www.fgcu.edu/honors/admissions/>; Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, <https://www.famu.edu/academics/undergraduate-academics/honors-program/admissions-criteria.php>; University of West Florida, <https://uwf.edu/academic-engagement-and-student-affairs/departments/kugelman-honors-program/programs/4-year-pathway/>; University of North Florida, <https://www.unf.edu/hicks/why-honors.html#>; New College of Florida (2024), <https://www.ncf.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/2023-2024-Fact-Book-Publisher-File-07.17.24.pdf>.

*\*Minimum required, not average.*

*†Guideline for admission.*

*Florida Polytechnic University has no honors college.*

The admissions office, despite accessing ample resources such as the scholarship offers that are generously distributed to applicants, and the ability to offer outstanding opportunities in athletics, has only modestly grown enrollment, is simply maintaining First Time in College enrollment numbers with only the barest glimmer of growth, and has severely compromised the academic qualifications needed to attend New College. The data tell a story of simple lack of success, at least so far.

I am sympathetic to those grappling with the admissions issue because my engagement with New College since 2019 has taught me what a fundamental and long-term problem New College has with enrollment. Indeed, Trustee Rufo, President Corcoran and others called out stagnating and declining enrollment as a symptom of the College's problems previous to January, 2023, and with legitimate reason. Previous to January, 2023, New College cycled through several Deans of Enrollment Management in short order, with no President of the College seeming capable of breaking the pattern. The College also began to rely – unsuccessfully – on outside consultants due to being unable to find the necessary insight and initiative among its own administrators. The criticisms of previous administrations were only too prescient: the secular decline in enrollment among liberal arts colleges in America is indeed a powerful headwind that we failed to confront adequately in the past and that still challenges us today.

While admissions personnel can achieve modest gains in enrollment by marginally upgrading the quality of their operations, or by increasing expenditures on enrollment incentives like scholarships, the real long-term issue is that of identifying a market niche and developing a distinctive, well-communicated offering. So, the struggle with enrollment relates directly to New College's strategic vision, which depends on the help of the faculty and College President but is ultimately set by the Trustees. My main objective in this section has simply been to bring the lack of a currently effective admissions strategy to your attention. But I offer the further reflection that New College's offering to the marketplace seems muddled. Are we a classical learning program? A great books program? A center for achievement in athletics? A refuge from a stultifying dogmatism prevalent elsewhere in higher education? An academically high-achieving college characterized by student initiative, undergraduate research, and personalized education? What sets our standalone college apart from the honors colleges or honors programs that have been set up within ten sizeable public universities in Florida? How do we synthesize our core, undergraduate offering and our smattering of master's programs? I fear that without a strong, clear vision, we can never capture the imaginations of prospective students and distinguish ourselves from all the other good quality, but generic, liberal arts colleges that face the same secular decline in enrollment.

The misalignment between the actions of the current admissions department and the stated mission of the college is compounded by the opaque financial operations required to achieve it. The athletics department employs some 50 staff; how does a college pay for 50

athletics staff, most of whom the college cannot pay with public funds? It labels their work, in part, “admissions work,” and so taxpayer monies can pay for athletic recruiting. And how do these recruits get “athletic scholarships” if public funds cannot be used and the Foundation is not raising money to support them? Transform these “athletic scholarships” into “academic scholarships,” and then public monies can be used and prospective students can “earn” these publicly-funded “athletic scholarships.” Thus, illustrating the extent to which we have lost sight of our real work with admissions, we are now in the odd situation of awarding a great many publicly-funded scholarships recognizing academic merit, but producing a student body with the lowest level of academic preparedness in the College’s history. Redirection from the Trustees, as well as your active effort to gain full information and documentation about how current operations work, is badly needed.

## **2. New College Foundation, Inc. – Opaque Finances and Lack of Confidence**

The primary lack of transparency I would like to surface is that the Foundation’s Board does not know the precise sources or attributions of income (including investment income) from among its various funds, and does not know how specific funds are used toward expenditures as they come due. The Foundation’s financials are purpose-built to conceal many expenditures and further conceal ongoing liabilities. Our College administration has taken a clear position that the College is ultimately responsible for the Foundation: a position that implies not just control, but also responsibility. My March 24, 2025 resignation letter – as an ex officio Foundation Board member – suggested that the Foundation may not even be solvent (in the sense of having enough free and unrestricted funds to meet obligations as they come due), and I contend, respectfully, that this situation requires your inquiry. Anyone skilled in reading financials can determine from the Foundation’s published financials that the Foundation appears to be in distress.

Are expenses that the Foundation is tasked with paying, including obligations under scholarships, and payroll expenses for the College President and many athletics personnel, so inflexible that the College would face a crisis if the Foundation could not meet those expenses? (Keep in mind that many of these categories of expenses are assigned to the Foundation specifically because they cannot lawfully be met with public funds.) And has there been a clear and simple analysis of how far the Foundation can spend toward those expenses before it runs up against the hard barriers of fund restrictions and permanently endowed funds?

Long before I personally began raising them, the questions swirling around the Foundation crippled its ability to relate well to local constituencies which could provide substantial and sustained support to the College. Even when the College President brings in substantial funding by leveraging his personal connections and persuasively communicating opportunities, I can’t dispel my thoughts of the large donor communities that go untapped solely because the Foundation doesn’t give a more fulsome and transparent account of itself. The fact that the Foundation’s current direct spend rate from endowed funds is only 1.25% (eclipsed by the 2.25% administrative fee charged on the same funds) further retards the Foundation’s fundraising potential.

## **3. Fiscal Efficiency of New College of Florida**

At the January 30, 2025 meeting of the State University System Board of Governors, Board of Governors Member Eric Silagy described New College's cost-per-student as follows:

“You’ll recall the conversation we had last fall about what the spending was at New College and it wasn’t clear. I said it was \$ 91,000 a student, [President Corcoran] thought it was \$ 60,000 a student, I think we both now agree it's between \$ 88,000 and \$ 91,000 a student . . . . I’ve gone through New College’s budget as proposed by its Board of Trustees and what the Legislature is relying on in order to fund this 24/25 cycle. And that one says it’s \$ 105 million in expenses, which . . . . It’s somewhere between \$ 140,000 a student or \$ 114,000 a student.”<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion, from a credible official, that the cost of New College’s program on a per-student basis may be as high as \$ 140,000 shocked me and was one of several factors catalyzing my resignation from my Alumni Association role. I did not assume that the suggestion is accurate, but the fact that our administration did not appear to take it seriously or to comprehensively rebut it or contextualize it disturbed me greatly. You, as Trustees, more than anyone deserve a clear and thorough accounting of the actual fiscal efficiency of the College.

The perspective of alumni like myself is very long-term, which from the administration’s perspective is something of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, we can tolerate high short-term costs if they are truly in the nature of an investment. On the other hand, we know with near certainty that per-student costs on the scale alleged by Board of Governors Member Silagy will eventually cause a crisis if they are maintained year after year. It is simply not a formula for a long-term, productive relationship with state government and taxpayers— the very relationship that many of you came here to reset.

Currently, there are no metrics to assess whether the taxpayers’ extraordinary generosity is being productively invested or squandered. The College does not even release adequate data to independently and confidently construct such metrics, as Board of Governors Member Silagy’s multiple discussions regarding a very basic metric – cost per student – demonstrate. The College seems to be – and thus far has been – without the type of reporting that would allow you to understand and control its finances.

#### **4. A Lack of Mission Control**

The first section in this letter, about our most fundamental challenge, enrollment growth, closes with a discussion of the College’s currently muddled identity which causes it to rely on

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<sup>8</sup> The full recording of the meeting is available at The Florida Channel’s website: <https://thefloridachannel.org/videos/1-30-25-florida-board-of-governors-meeting/>. The section quoted above begins at 2:48:50 in the recording.

expensive, short-term methods to drive enrollment growth. Similarly, the lack of active and strategically informed management of the academic program results in poor academic program quality which impacts other metrics.

As FTIC enrollment stagnates and admitted students' academic qualifications decline, the College's ranking in U.S. News & World Report drops accordingly, having now fallen for two years in a row and placing us solidly below institutions we formerly considered peers.<sup>9</sup> That may not be a significant concern, but it's been posited that the president of the University of Florida was terminated for this very reason.<sup>10</sup> Does the administration forecast a further drop in the ranking, or does it expect stabilization?

Anecdotally, there are concerns about the retention of students. Has the administration reported to you on whether students who matriculated in Fall, 2023 and Fall, 2024 are progressing through the program successfully, and how many have withdrawn? With FTIC enrollment stagnating, potential retention problems, the use of expensive scholarships to draw in students, and the dramatic compromises made on the academic qualifications needed to attend the College, it may be the case that the College's top-line pattern of enrollment growth is very artificial.

Enrolled students are, like prospective students, a population the College must involve in a coherent vision of itself: what is the nature of the program they are buying into with their annual fall return to classes? Without a compelling concept of their course of study and the meaning of their degrees, there is no strong glue to keep students motivated to overcome the inevitable obstacles to the completion of their degrees, an issue that is all the more pronounced at a highly unconventional place like New College.

In other words, while the outward image New College projects to prospective students is muddled, its academic program is also muddled internally. As one example, New College continues to condition graduation on the completion of an undergraduate thesis or project. This program feature is immensely popular with the alumni community, who see it along with the "contract" system and narrative evaluations as part of the original vision of student-centered education. Similar thesis or "capstone" projects are becoming increasingly prevalent at other honors programs in the state.<sup>11</sup> But the profiles of much of New College's current student body are not consistent with students who typically undertake such projects.

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<sup>9</sup> Sarasota Herald-Tribune, Heather Bushman, Sept. 30, 2024, "New College national ranking drops double-digits for the second year in a row," available at <https://www.heraldtribune.com/story/news/education/2024/09/30/new-college-national-ranking-drops-double-digits/75375011007/>.

<sup>10</sup> New York Times, Nov. 17, 2024, "A Star President's Resignation Was a Mystery. Was It All About Rankings?" available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/17/us/politics/rankings-university-of-florida-ben-sasse.html>.

<sup>11</sup> See University of Central Florida, Burnett Honors College, Honors Undergraduate Thesis, <https://honors.ucf.edu/hut/about/>.



## **5. No Progress on Core Physical Projects**

The Florida Statutes describe New College as “the residential liberal arts honors college of the State,” and all really strong liberal arts colleges are highly residential.<sup>12</sup> Honors college offerings elsewhere in the State University System offer special on-campus housing for their students.<sup>13</sup> More still, it is very clear from my conversations with the student community that Sarasota / Manatee’s market for off-campus rental housing is quite hard for people in their position to break into, as might be expected in an area that has become a prominent, upscale retirement and vacation destination. Suffice to say, if the College were to force a greater percentage of the student body to rely on their own, off-campus housing arrangements, its enrollment and retention problems would worsen.

I am sympathetic to the administration inasmuch as it was forced to take the Pei dormitories on East Campus offline after doing an appropriate and long-overdue assessment of their condition. Student housing has been a recurrent topic at your meetings, and the use of leased blocks of hotel rooms, and portable housing units, were presented to you as stepping stones on the way to more permanent facilities. But at this point, the administration’s lack of real progress toward permanent housing facilities (the construction or acquisition of new dormitories, or the rehabilitation of the Pei dormitories) raises a substantial question about the College’s direction. There is no fundamental obstacle to constructing dormitories on land already owned by the College at present, nor has the administration indicated any.

It’s been over two years since the new administration assumed control, and we hear only vague statements about “master plans” when it comes to the pressing need for dormitory space, let alone other potential core projects. For as long as building plans remain in this unexplained limbo, the College will remain locked into a high cost structure and will also accrue skepticism and potential embarrassment from its long-term reliance on ostensibly temporary solutions.

### **Conclusion**

My goal herein has been to convince you that these five issues have become so acute that they require a hands-on approach from you, as Trustees. Trustees are not mere spectators, and in a time of high risk must exercise appropriate oversight and control.

Thank you very much for your consideration.

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<sup>12</sup> Florida Statutes § 1004.32(1).

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., University of South Florida, Judy Genshaft Honors College Housing, <https://www.usf.edu/honors/prospective-students/housing.aspx>; University of North Florida, Hicks Honors College, Honors Living, <https://www.unf.edu/hicks/honors-living.html>.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ben Brown". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent "B" at the start and a long, sweeping underline.

Benjamin Brown