



STATE POLITICS

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## Governor's veto is actually good news for Miami Dade College

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TALLAHASSEE — Gov. Rick Scott on Wednesday vetoed a sweeping higher education reform bill that was one of Senate President Joe Negron's top priorities of the 2017 session, saying that the measure "impedes" the ability of state colleges to provide access to low-cost, quality education.

Scott's rejection of SB 374 halts several of Negron's reforms intended to make the state's 12 public universities nationally competitive, "elite" destinations and refocus the Florida College System back to its mission of addressing local workforce needs.

"This legislation impedes the State College System's mission by capping the enrollment level of baccalaureate degrees and unnecessarily increasing red tape," Scott wrote in his veto letter.

Miami Dade College's Executive Vice President and Provost Lenore Rodicio said in a statement the college is "relieved" at the veto, which would have introduced new performance metrics Rodicio said "did not reflect the reality of our community college students."

"We look forward to continued conversations on how to more accurately measure performance in light of the mission of the Florida College System and the needs of the students it serves," she wrote.

The governor acknowledged that the bill also included provisions expanding popular financial aid programs that help tens of thousands of college and university students, including Florida Bright Futures Academic Scholars — but he said those programs are unharmed by the veto because they were also embedded in the full state budget that the governor signed June 2.

"While the bill makes positive changes to several State University System programs ... it does so at the expense of the Florida College System," Scott wrote, adding that the budget he signed also cut \$24.7 million from the total colleges budget.

Although the Senate proposal did give an extra \$232 million to universities in the annual budget — while simultaneously cutting millions from the colleges, which primarily serve low-income students — Negron said in a statement he "fundamentally disagreed" that universities were helped at the expense of colleges.

"We crafted SB 374 to further elevate Florida's nationally-ranked community colleges through a renewed focus on their core mission — on-time completion of vital associate degrees and workforce credentials that prepare students for jobs in communities across our state," he said.

He also criticized the governor for removing the permanent expansion of Bright Futures and other scholarships, forcing families to hope lawmakers expand it next year.

"Students and families deserve certainty when making these important decisions, and today's veto makes advance planning much more difficult," he said.

College administrators called the disparity in treatment between colleges and universities “demoralizing” and harmful to services that help students unprepared for college catch up. Many of them spoke in opposition to the Senate’s proposed changes, particularly the proposal to restrict their ability to offer four-year degrees.

Senate supporters, however, argued the bill was needed to rein in colleges because of what they considered duplication and competition with programs already offered by Florida’s 12 public universities.

SB 374 also would have renamed the state schools as “community colleges” and removed them from the purview of the State Board of Education and state Education Commissioner Pam Stewart. Instead, the colleges would have been overseen by the authority of a new State Board of Community Colleges.





Senate President Joe Negron, R-Stuart  
Steve Cannon - AP

Despite the veto, programs that expand financial aid — both merit-based and need-based — will go forward for one year because they were embedded in the main 2017-18 budget act and not dependent on the bill to take effect. The governor urged lawmakers to come back next year and make the changes permanent.

“Bright Futures, faculty recruitment, all of those dollars — \$600 plus million — was all tied to the budget,” said Sen. Bill Galvano, a Bradenton Republican who is the higher education budget chairman.

Those financial aid benefits include:

- Restoring awards for 111,000 Florida Bright Futures Academic Scholars back to 100 percent of tuition and fees, plus \$300 per semester for books and other expenses and aid for the summer semester;
- Expanding eligibility for the Benacquisto Scholarship Program to include out-of-state students;
- Doubling the state’s share of a state-to-private match that pays for a grant awarded to students who are the first generation in their family to attend a college or university;
- Establishing a new scholarship program, sponsored by Miami Republican Sen. Anitere Flores, to benefit farm-workers and their children.

Negron told reporters on June 9 he’d spoken recently to community groups and when he explained to them the extra money Bright Futures scholars would have access to, he said: “I’ve had parents come up to me with tears in their eyes, saying ‘you don’t know how much pressure this has taken off of our family.’”

It was not immediately clear whether another cost-savings measure was affected — a policy change requiring state universities to adopt block tuition rates, rather than students having to pay for each credit hour.

Scott approved some funding cuts to the Florida College System when he signed off on the annual 2017-18 state budget on June 2.

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SB 374 had easily passed both chambers on the final day of the regular session in May. The Senate approved it 35-3, while the House supported it 85-27.

Senate Democratic Leader Oscar Braynon noted that the governor has yet to address the controversial bill to expand charter schools, HB 7069, and urged him to veto it.

“If the governor is so concerned about working-class people and the communities he serves, he should apply that same logic he used and veto 7069,” said Braynon of Miami Gardens.

Meanwhile, Negron said he would continue to fight.

“Our higher education system is our primary economic engine to drive vibrant, sustainable economic development and growth in high-paying jobs,” he said. “I will continue my commitment to Florida’s students and our colleges and universities next session.”

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Sen. Bill Galvano, R-Bradenton **Mark Wallheiser** - AP

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