Attempts to undermine faculty autonomy are not new. In 2023, faculty at all levels around the United States experienced unprecedented attacks on faculty rights and working conditions. These attacks emanated from legislatures, boards of trustees, and administrators who moved to adopt restrictive corporate models of education as well as impose their political agenda. Institutions, claiming some sort of exigency, laid off faculty members; they restructured programs and ignored institutional policies requiring shared governance and academic freedom. In thirteen months, between March 2022 and April 2023, twenty-nine state legislatures proposed seventy-eight pieces of education legislation.¹

The majority of the bills were motivated by political, racial, and ideological animus and designed to reshape public education. Most proposed legislation sought to limit teaching about race, gender, and sexual orientation. Many of the bills forbid teaching CRT (critical race theory) and public spending on efforts to promote DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). They sought to ban affirmative action and identity-based preferences in hiring faculty and admitting students to programs. Moreover, they sought to place limits on curriculum offerings, impose restrictions on free speech, and end tenure for faculty.

These efforts across the US were uneven; seventeen of the twenty-nine state legislatures proposed only one or two bills.² Ten states proposed three to four pieces of legislation.³ One state proposed five separate bills, and Texas proposed eighteen bills.⁴ While many of these bills used

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3. Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Virginia, and West Virginia.
4. South Carolina introduced five bills.
the same language and covered similar issues, Florida's House Bill 999 provided an extreme example of government censorship, including unconstitutional provisions hostile to free speech and academic freedom on its university campuses. HB 999 received significant attention from educational organizations, faculty unions, and the media due to the governor’s aggressive attacks on higher education faculty.\(^5\)

In January 2023, the governor of Florida held a press conference to signal his intent to defund DEI efforts in the state and significantly reform public universities. On February 21, 2023, before the state legislative session began, HB 999 was prefiled. The proposed legislation provided the blueprint for the governor’s plan. DEI statements were forbidden and programs or activities that espoused DEI or CRT were denied funding. Boards of trustees were empowered, along with university presidents, to hire faculty without considering faculty input. Post-tenure reviews were mandated every five years and allowed at any time for cause. Numerous majors and minors were stricken from universities, including ethnic studies, gender studies, and intersectionality, as well as CRT, queer theory, feminist theory, and social justice. HB 999 also proposed significant changes to the general education curriculum and required the Florida Board of Governors (the governing board for the State University System of Florida) to oversee and revise each university’s mission statement to ensure each institution adhered to the purported objective of educating students for citizenship in a constitutional republic and for the state’s workforce needs.

The American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) posted a public statement against HB 999.\(^6\) Forty major academic organizations and hundreds of faculty members from the US and Canada signed on in support of the statement. The American Historical Association (AHA) also issued a statement against HB 999, saying, “What has previously best been characterized as unwarranted political intervention into public education has now escalated to an attempt at a hostile takeover of a state’s system of higher education.”\(^7\) Eighty-five education-related organizations signed on in support of the AHA statement. H-Net Council endorsed the ACLS and AHA statements in opposition to Florida HB 999 and voted to issue a statement of academic freedom based on H-Net’s mission and values.\(^8\) The protests and backlash against HB 999, and much of the other proposed legislation, have halted or altered most of the bills. As of April 2024, only seven of the proposed bills have passed. HB 999 did not pass, but its companion bill, Senate Bill 266, which was slightly less problematic, was signed into law. While the majority of legislation proposed has been stalled, it has had a chilling effect on the quality of public higher education.

Amid this educational climate, H-Net conference organizers decided that the theme for the 2023 Second Annual Teaching and Learning Conference would be “Critical Conversations: Teaching and Creating Community in Difficult Times.” This conference thematic afforded faculty members across various disciplines and academic levels a welcome framework that encouraged nuanced discussions over the complexities in today’s disrupted educational environment. The conference program featured sessions with a focus on pedagogical strategies, as well as those that grappled with five key issues: DEI; the reconfiguration of post-COVID-19 learning environments; the ethical implications of AI (artificial intelligence) in education; challenges to teaching CRT; and the intricacies of navigating administrative directives regarding curricular frameworks, book banning, and course restructuring endeavors.
During the conference, panelists offered insightful presentations that not only elucidated the issues but also proffered diverse approaches for surmounting them. Consequently, the presentations engendered spirited dialogues, fostering a collaborative environment wherein faculty members shared innovative solutions and invaluable teaching resources. Over the course of four days, conference attendees from five continents and fourteen nations came together in a dynamic exchange of research insights and pedagogical best practices that crossed international borders.

H-Net welcomed Wiki Education and the Organization of American Historians (OAH) as cosponsors of the conference. On Wednesday, August 23, 2023, the Wiki Education Room hosted workshops and panels concentrating on technological tools for classroom learning, specifically, the Wikipedia Student Program, where college and university instructors, alongside program staff, illustrated the benefits of assigning students to contribute to Wikipedia entries related to their coursework. Under the guidance of faculty members, students conduct research on topics relevant to their courses that are either absent or insufficiently covered on Wikipedia. After thorough review by their professors, approved student essays are integrated into Wikipedia using Wiki Education’s free tools and training resources. On Thursday, August 24, 2023, during “OAH Night,” OAH sponsored panels aimed at promoting exemplary instruction in American history across various educational levels and platforms. Panel topics encompassed discussions of the influence of state policies and legislation on teaching CRT in kindergarten through university levels. A workshop explored innovative pedagogical approaches for teaching migration and ethnic history to diverse audiences.

Forty presenters led discussions across two workshops, three roundtable sessions, and eleven panel sessions. These addressed various challenges confronting educators in diverse educational settings. The presenters shared innovative teaching strategies, useful resources, and course syllabi. Altogether, over four days, the various panels, roundtables, and workshops attracted 357 participants, with some people attending several panels across multiple days. Participants engaged in crucial conversations about fostering community during challenging times. These discussions, though often cut short by time constraints, covered such topics as teaching social justice and CRT despite bans, implementing DEI initiatives without explicit labels, and exploring the integration of AI in classrooms. Participants were well equipped with, or reminded of, valuable tools to ensure equitable learning environments for all students. For instance, an intriguing conversation emerged from a presenter’s experience of unexpected outcomes while introducing a new lesson to students. This prompted significant reflections from participants on adapting teaching methods to resolve unanticipated classroom challenges.

This edited volume contains eight essays that capture these ideas and extend their reach and application beyond the conference presentations. Yehuda Silverman and Sharon McIntyre introduce the idea that, alongside traditional educational hurdles, faculty face increased political challenges concerning classroom content and instructional methods. To mitigate potential complications associated with teaching contentious subjects, they recommend the adoption of active learning techniques as well as conflict resolution strategies to facilitate collaborative efforts between faculty and students in cultivating an environment of inclusivity when addressing challenging topics.
In their article, Jill Abney, Kate Collins, and Isabelle Blaber discuss findings from their Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SOTL) study conducted within a college-level war and society course. The study examines challenges identified by students in learning about the Holocaust, along with their strategies for coping with the emotional distress inherent in the learning process. The authors highlight approaches for teaching difficult histories using a trauma-informed method, and they also present insights into student responses to an oral history podcast assignment designed to facilitate thoughtful and effective communication on sensitive subjects.

The pedagogical approach of Carrie Schultz, Mary Potorti, Martha Gardner, and Kristen Petersen emphasizes the ways race, class, and gender intersect and affect health disparities. Their diverse teaching methods encourage students in health science programs to analyze these intersections and consider solutions to health care challenges. Emphasizing critical thinking, their goal is to provide future health care workers with the intellectual and professional tools they will need to address health inequities and advocate for health justice.

Stephen Wilson shares a personal story reflecting on the communal loss experienced in classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In his article, he emphasizes the significance of educators cultivating intentional learning communities. Drawing from his experiences teaching remedial English and composition courses, Wilson illustrates how he guides students to overcome apprehension through the implementation of low-stakes assignments, fostering a culture of writing without worry.

Kathleen McMichael Goodyear argues that amid today’s divisive atmosphere, education should emphasize holistic methods to cultivate empathy and comprehension among students. Her article recommends the use of arts-based inquiry as a means for students to explore the intricacies of identity. She also advocates using artistic activities to enhance students’ self-awareness, understanding, and empathy toward peers from various backgrounds, aiming to nurture a stronger sense of belonging and community within the classroom.

Jennifer Egloff’s article presents a significant viewpoint within academia, suggesting that the use of AI in classrooms can hinder students’ overall development. She offers practical examples of how faculty members can design essay assignments that resist reliance on ChatGPT. These strategies include integrating essays into larger, scaffolded assignments; emphasizing transparent research processes; facilitating brainstorming and discussion sessions throughout the project; providing consistent feedback on writing; promoting the use of university resources; and offering personalized assistance to struggling students. Through the implementation of these strategies, Egloff ensures that students cultivate essential skills, such as information literacy, critical analysis, organization, and articulate expression, all of which are integral to successful college essay writing.

In response to societal polarization and contentious political landscapes, Erica Hayden and Allison Buzard, educators at a liberal arts college, created an interdisciplinary course titled “Power to the People.” This course delved into the history and strategies of social movements in the United States, addressing contemporary issues such as CRT and LGBTQIA2S+ identities. Despite anticipating controversy, they recognized the opportunity to foster a critical dialogue that will empower students to navigate a polarized workforce. Their interdisciplinary approach

highlights the significance of addressing complex societal issues and equipping students with the skills necessary for engagement in today’s divided world.

Jacob Ivey’s article depicts a carefully designed assignment that uses digital archives and focused historical inquiry to equip students with a wide range of research materials, fostering a deep understanding of historical content. This resource is invaluable for educators seeking to cultivate critical thinking and digital literacy skills among their students. Central to this approach is Ivey’s use of online databases, such as the South African History Archive’s “The Land Act Legacy Project Collection,” the African Activist Archive, and the Library of Congress’s “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938.” In a twenty-first century already characterized by rapid political and cultural shifts, proficiency in digital literacy and associated research methodologies are essential for navigating complex historical narratives in our increasingly interconnected world.

The Proceedings of the Second Annual Teaching and Learning Conference, “Critical Conversations: Teaching and Creating Community in Difficult Times,” present an indispensable and wide-ranging assortment of articles that provide educators with innovative teaching strategies tailored to the evolving dynamics of the classroom. These articles reflect the growing trend among teacher-scholars to explore nuanced approaches to pedagogy, acknowledging the changing educational landscape. In light of these transformations, H-Net continues to prioritize fostering ongoing dialogue and exploration in this essential domain.

However, participating in the annual conference or being published in the conference proceedings represents only two possibilities for engagement with H-Net. For more than thirty years, H-Net has been providing opportunities to share research and teaching tips; discuss historiography, methods, and tools for analysis; and so much more. H-Net (H-Net Reviews) publishes more than 1,500 book reviews each year and maintains an archive of book reviews that dates back to 1993. The H-Net Job Guide lists monthly job openings for academic jobs in history and social sciences, as well as opportunities in the nonacademic world of nonprofits, government, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). As an international interdisciplinary consortium of scholars and educators, H-Net harnesses the vast educational potential of the internet and the World Wide Web. Through two hundred moderated networks, the H-Net Commons provides a diverse array of spaces for the creation and dissemination of knowledge. This content includes peer-reviewed journals and multimedia materials catering to teachers, scholars, and the interested public. We welcome you to join H-Net - Humanities and Social Sciences Online, where global intellect and ideas converge. Whether you are a seasoned scholar or just beginning your academic journey, H-Net provides invaluable resources and a supportive community to help you thrive and engage in collaborative knowledge production in challenging times.
AUTHOR BIO


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