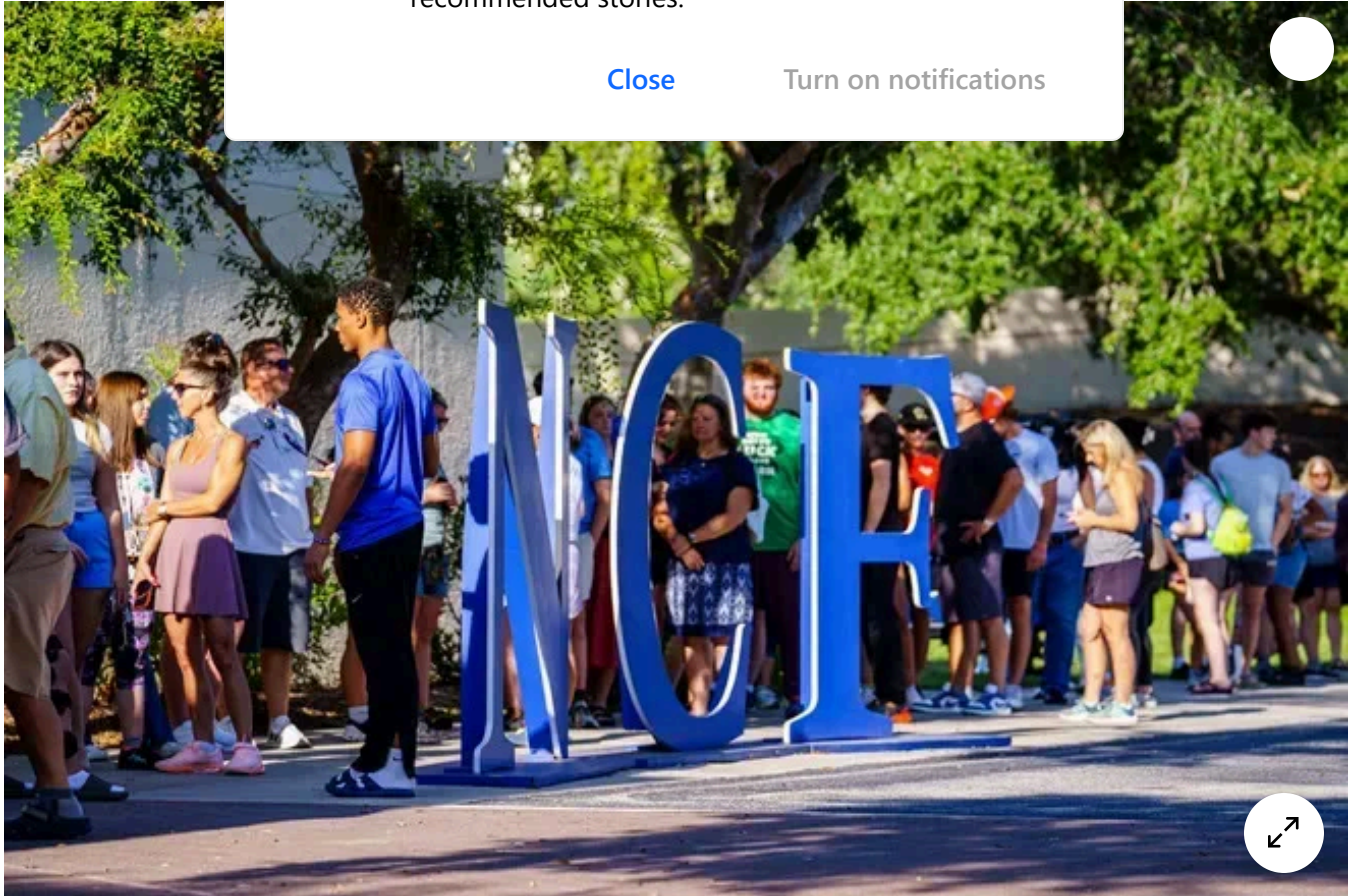




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New College students line up on check-in day for the fall 2024 semester Aug. 21

A [lawsuit against New College of Florida](#) alleging a violation of Florida's public records law has resolved with a settlement, according to court records.

The Florida Center for Government Accountability, a nonprofit group focused on government accountability, sued New College of Florida and Trustee Christopher Rufo in February 2023 alleging that they withheld public records

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nonprofit had requested text messages and logs of all texts and phone calls made by Rufo between Jan. 6, when Gov. Ron DeSantis appointed him to the New College board, and Jan. 23.

Previous reporting: [Lawsuit accuses New College and Trustee Christopher Rufo of violating public records law](#)

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according to the complaint. The request included any record that was sent or received on personal devices, according to the complaint.

Court records indicate that New College took the position that the records the Center had requested were not public records. The Center sought to have the courts intervene to not only have New College produce the records but also preserve them.

The Center in March 2023 sought to add trustees Eddie Speir, Matthew Spalding, Charles Kesler, Mark Bauerlein, and Debra Jenks as defendants, later filing another complaint adding more defendants to the complaint, including former New College President Patricia Okker. In a third amended complaint filed in late March 2023, New College was the sole defendant, according to court records.

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A settlement was reached on May 8, more than two years after the lawsuit was filed. A news release from the Florida Trident stated that per the settlement terms, New College of Florida will pay \$125,000 in attorney's fees. Additionally, all trustees are required to use agency-issued cell phones to conduct official business and complete additional training on Florida's Public Records Act, with emphasis on properly archiving public records.

The Twelfth Judicial Circuit Court will retain jurisdiction to ensure the agreement is followed, according to court records.

"This case sends a strong message: public officials are not above the law," Michael Barfield, director of public access for the Florida Center for Government Accountability, said in a news release. "New College's agreement to implement safeguards and submit to court oversight represents a significant

step forward
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A statement from New College confirmed the terms of the settlement agreement, including the enhancement of its public records training and that it shall provide cell phones to trustees.

"The parties entered into a voluntary settlement agreement that provides for the dismissal of the case with prejudice, no admission of liability, and, most importantly, no concession of New College's legal position," the statement said in part.

[Rufo and five other trustees were appointed by DeSantis](#) to the New College board on the same day in a bid to transform the small liberal arts school as part of the governor's experiment in conservative higher education reform.

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The new trustees fired former New College President Patricia Okker on Jan. 31 and proposed hiring Richard Corcoran, DeSantis' former education secretary, as interim president. Months later, the [board of trustees voted to keep Corcoran](#) as the permanent president of the college.

Gabriela Szymanowska covers the legal system for the Herald-Tribune in partnership with Report for America. You can support her work with a [tax-deductible donation to Report for America](#). Contact Gabriela Szymanowska at gszymanowska@gannett.com.

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