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Targeted Online Harassment of Faculty

The 2016 election has exacerbated a political climate that was already inimical to academic freedom. Six years ago the American Association of University Professors conveyed its concern that “the war on terror, the conflict in the Middle East, and a resurgence of the culture wars in such scientific fields as health and the environment” had created an atmosphere “in which partisan political interests threaten to overwhelm academic judgment.”¹ Since the election, we have seen a resurgence of politically motivated witch hunts against academic scientists working in fields such as climate change and fetal tissue research, where the implications of scientific findings are perceived as threats by entrenched interests and partisan ideologues. In addition to the “danger zones” for academic freedom enumerated in 2011, issues related to racial justice have also come to the forefront in the course of the last two years and played a prominent role in the most recent election.

Against this backdrop, ongoing and new efforts by private groups to monitor the conduct of faculty members have heightened concerns about the impact of the political climate on academic freedom. Thirteen years ago the Association’s Special Committee on Academic Freedom and National Security in a Time of Crisis remarked that such groups, “parading under the banner of patriotism or acting to further a specific cause, have been monitoring academic activities and have denounced professorial departures from what these groups view as acceptable. A private project called Campus Watch, for example, has subjected professors of Middle Eastern studies to such scrutiny. Antecedents to these efforts can be found in the activities of the John Birch Society in the 1960s and of the Accuracy in Academia movement in the 1980s.” Today, their descendants can be found on websites such as Campus Reform, College Fix, or Professor Watchlist.

1. “Ensuring Academic Freedom in Politically Controversial Personnel Decisions,” in *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (supplement to *Academe*), 2011, 88.

A website like Professor Watchlist, which purports to identify faculty who “discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom” and which had initially also aimed to identify those who “promote anti-American values,” lists names of professors with their institutional affiliations and photographs, thereby making it easy for would-be stalkers and cyberbullies to target them. Individual faculty members who have been included on such lists or singled out elsewhere have been subject to threats of physical violence, including sexual assault, through hundreds of e-mails, calls, and social media postings. Such threatening messages are likely to stifle the free expression of the targeted faculty member; further, the publicity that such cases attracts can cause others to self-censor so as to avoid being subjected to similar treatment. Thus, targeted online harassment is a threat to academic freedom.

Commenting on the distinction between governmental interference in academic freedom and the activities of external faculty monitors, the Association’s special committee made the following observation about the latter:

As private entities, these groups are protected by the First Amendment from state censorship or sanction as long as they stay within lawful bounds. They are sheltered by the same freedom of expression that we seek for ourselves, and they are equally subject to public rebuke. Insofar as a particular professor might be thrust into the rough and tumble of the public arena, the law demands, as a prominent legal scholar once put it, a certain toughening of the mental hide. Such is the price of free speech.²

But while it may indeed be wise counsel for those who have been thrust into the public arena (willingly or unwillingly) to steel themselves against harsh criticism, surely such advice does not extend to threats against faculty members’ lives or those of their family members. In 2011 “alt-right” publisher Andrew Breitbart posted a surreptitiously recorded video clip of a labor studies class at the University of Missouri that had been edited to distort the context of the classroom discussion, an action that led to death threats to the instructors. In response to Breitbart’s action, the AAUP observed: “When students voice their views in class, they should not have to

2. “Academic Freedom and National Security in a Time of Crisis,” *Academe*, November–December 2003, 37. The Association publicly rebuked the John Birch Society, Accuracy in Academia, and Campus Watch, calling them, respectively, “the very antithesis of the scholarly community”; “antithetical to the freedom of faculty members to teach and of students to learn, as well as a threat to the freedom of the academic institutions themselves”; and “a menace to academic freedom.”

fear that their comments will be spread all over the Internet. When faculty members rightly explore difficult topics in class, they should not have to fear for their jobs or their lives.”

The AAUP does not dispute the First Amendment rights of these organizations, nor does it call for government censorship or sanction against them. It does, however, condemn efforts to intimidate or silence faculty members, and it urges others to do so as well. Governing boards of colleges and universities have a responsibility to defend academic freedom and institutional autonomy, including to protect institutions from undue public interference, by resisting calls for the dismissal of faculty members and by condemning their targeted harassment and intimidation. As the AAUP’s *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* asserts: “When ignorance or ill will threatens the institution or any part of it, the governing board must be available for support. In grave crises it will be expected to serve as a champion. Although the action to be taken by it will usually be on behalf of the president, the faculty, or the student body, the board should make clear that the protection it offers to an individual or a group is, in fact, a fundamental defense of the vested interests of society in the educational institution.” But while the board has a particular responsibility to protect the institution, the maintenance of academic freedom is a responsibility shared by all components of the institution: governing board, administration, and faculty.

Recommendations

1. The AAUP urges administrations, governing boards, and faculties, individually and collectively, to speak out clearly and forcefully to defend academic freedom and to condemn targeted harassment and intimidation of faculty members.
2. The AAUP recommends that administrations and elected faculty bodies work jointly to establish institutional regulations that prohibit the surreptitious recording of classroom discourse or of private meetings between students and faculty members.