



May 17, 2018

### **AAUP Releases Investigation of Campus Protest Case**

An investigative report is out today in a case that crystallizes the current right-wing assault on higher education. It involves issues that the AAUP has been working on intensively this year: faculty harassment and exaggerated controversies over free speech on campus.

The case concerns Courtney Lawton, a graduate student and part-time lecturer at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. At the beginning of the fall semester, Lawton protested an on-campus recruitment table of Turning Point USA, a conservative organization that maintains the Professor Watchlist. Her protest was recorded by the undergraduate student staffing the table, and the resulting video was widely disseminated online—one of the primary strategies of right-wing groups in their attacks on higher education—leading to threats against her and the university.

While Lawton was under vicious attack for her protest speech, state legislators launched a campaign of political pressure on the university, suggesting that Lawton’s conduct toward the student staffing the recruitment table was representative of a campus climate hostile to conservative views and calling for her dismissal. The Nebraska Republican Party filed open-records requests for email correspondence related to the case, and “campus free-speech” legislation was introduced in a clear example of legislative overreach.

Under pressure, the university administration suspended Lawton from her teaching responsibilities and subsequently refused to reinstate her to the classroom, thus extending her suspension to the end of her term of appointment. This action was tantamount to summary dismissal, as the administration did not afford her any academic due process. An AAUP investigation found that “the conclusion seems inescapable that the basis for Ms. Lawton’s dismissal was related to the political content of her speech and thus may have violated her academic freedom, a conclusion that stands unrebutted absent the affordance of a dismissal hearing.”

We'll be discussing the case during a Facebook Live May 11 at 1:30 EST.

Campaigns of targeted harassment against individual faculty members and legislative attempts to impose misguided rules on institutions of higher education are on the rise. The AAUP believes that democracy thrives on dissent, critical inquiry, free speech, and free research. That’s why we investigated the case at the University of Nebraska and why we’ve developed

resources for you to use in fighting harassment of faculty and misleading “free-speech” legislation on your own campus.

[Read the full investigative report.](#)

[Learn more about how you can resist harassment of faculty and protect academic freedom.](#)