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Taking a Stand Against Harassment, Part of the Broader Threat to Higher Education

In recent months a disturbing trend has emerged in American higher education. At a variety of institutions—public and private, large and small—individual members of the faculty have been singled out for campaigns of harassment in response to remarks they have made, or are alleged to have made, in public speeches, on social media, or in the classroom. Vicious threats of violence and even death have been directed against individual faculty members and their families, including their children. A large number of those threatened have been African American.

The threats are often accompanied by calls for college and university administrators to summarily dismiss or otherwise discipline the offending faculty member. Sometimes the threats are also directed at those administrators or the institutions themselves. In some cases the comments made by the faculty member were highly provocative or easily misconstrued, but in other cases the allegedly offensive remarks were misattributed or not even made at all.

In all cases, however, these campaigns of harassment endanger more than the faculty member concerned. They pose a profound and ominous challenge to higher education's most fundamental values. The right of faculty members to speak or write as citizens, free from institutional censorship or discipline, has long been recognized as a core principle of academic freedom. While colleges and universities must make efforts to provide learning environments that are welcoming, diverse, and safe for all members of the university community and their guests, these efforts cannot and need not come at the expense of the right to free expression of all on campus and the academic freedom of the faculty.

We therefore call on college and university leaders and members of governing boards to reject outside pressures to remove or discipline faculty members whose ideas or commentary may be provocative or controversial and to denounce in forceful terms these campaigns of harassment. Some have already taken such a stance. The response of Syracuse University chancellor Kent Syverud to calls for the denunciation or dismissal of a professor who posted a controversial tweet is exemplary. "No," he said. "We are and will remain a university. Free speech is and will remain one of our key values. I can't imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth

thriving here without free speech. Our faculty must be able to say and write things—including things that provoke some or make others uncomfortable—up to the very limits of the law.”

Unfortunately, other administrations have been more equivocal in their responses, in a few cases disciplining the faculty member concerned while remaining silent about the terrifying harassment to which that faculty member has been subjected. Some offer hollow homilies in support of the free speech rights of outside speakers while failing to defend the rights of harassed faculty. Often administrators justify their response by appealing to legitimate concerns for the safety of the community. However, anything short of a vigorous defense of academic freedom will only further imperil safety. Concessions to the harassers send the message that such odious tactics are effective. They have a chilling effect on the entire academic community. Academic leaders are therefore obligated to recognize that attacks on the academic freedom of individual instructors pose a risk to the institution as a whole and to the very project of higher education as a public good. As the AAUP’s *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* stressed, the protection the college or university “offers to an individual or a group is, in fact, a fundamental defense of the vested interests of society in the educational institution.”

We call upon college and university presidents, members of governing boards, and other academic leaders to resist this campaign of harassment by endorsing this statement and making clear to all in their respective institutions that threats to individual members of the academic community, to academic freedom, and to freedom of expression on campus will not be tolerated.

Signed,
American Association of University Professors
American Federation of Teachers
Association of American Colleges and Universities