



November 22, 2021

Dear President Hemphill,

The Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA) is a coalition of faculty members from across the country and across the ideological spectrum who are committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom and professorial free speech.

We are concerned about the Old Dominion University's [handling of complaints involving Professor Allyn Walker](#). As you know, Professor Walker is an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice who does research on a variety of criminal justice issues, including on "minor attracted individuals." Professor Walker has published scholarly work on this topic for several years, but has recently attracted public controversy when they began to [publicize their new scholarly book](#) on the subject recently published by the [University of California Press](#). Students launched a [petition](#) calling for Professor Walker to be fired for holding "unacceptable" views. [National outlets amplified](#) the controversy. The university initially released a [statement](#) from Professor Walker that was appropriately framed in terms of the "valuable role in the quest for knowledge" that an academic community plays. Days later, however, the university placed Professor Walker on "[administrative leave](#)" given "concerns for their safety and that of the campus" and the ways in which the controversy "has disrupted the campus and community environment and is interfering with the institution's mission of teaching and learning." You personally issued a [statement](#) expressing the view that "I am troubled by this narrative" and conveying the views of others that "the phrase 'minor-attracted people' is inappropriate and should be utilized." Only after this denunciation of Professor Walker's research does the statement eventually recognize that research into sensitive topics is "at the heart of academic research," but then immediately qualifies any commitment to academic freedom by asserting "this freedom carries with it the obligation to speak and write with care and precision," by which you presumably mean that Professor Walker must use your prefer narrative and refer to the subjects of his research as pedophiles rather than as minor-attracted people and must center the "rejection of any form of sexual abuse of children" in their research.

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance to express our view that the university's action thus far is deeply troubling and shows an insufficient commitment to academic freedom. Rather than aggressively defending a member of its faculty from threats and explaining the purpose of a university to engage in difficult scholarly work on controversial topics, the university has chosen to remove a professor under fire from campus and denounce their work as being traumatic to members of the university community and broader public.

Old Dominion University has [adopted as official university policy](#) the principles of academic freedom advanced by the American Association of University Professors in the 1940 Statement



of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure. That policy includes the “full freedom in research and in the publication of the results.” A [separate policy](#) embraces the AAUP’s 1987 statement on professional ethics, including a commitment that the “primary responsibility” of professors as scholars “is to seek and state the truth as they see it.” The [university’s faculty handbook](#) guarantees that the “University affirms and protects faculty members’ rights to academic freedom, freedom of expression, and due process” and commits the university to not disciplining faculty members for the exercise of their right to engage in “free inquiry and exchange of ideas.”

Placing Professor Walker on “administrative leave” under these circumstances is deeply inimical to the university’s contractual commitments to academic freedom for members of the faculty and to the university’s obligations under the First Amendment not to hamper the ability of its faculty members to speak freely on matters of public concern. The AAUP has warned that professors should not be suspended from their normal duties except under the most extreme conditions and only with proper procedural protections. It is a “[serious harm](#)” and denial of “basic professional rights” for a professor to be removed involuntarily from the classroom and suspended from the performance of that professor’s ordinary professional duties on campus. Such a step should not be taken unless “[immediate harm](#)” would result from the professor continuing to perform their normal duties on campus and only with adequate consultation with a faculty committee charged with assessing disciplinary actions.

The university’s stated rationale for placing Professor Walker on administrative leave offers only a vague explanation of the circumstance that might justify such a step. It cannot be consistent with academic freedom for a university to cave in to hostile reaction on and off campus to a professor’s scholarly work. The fact that students or members of the public might be offended or disturbed by a professor’s research agenda, arguments or terminology is no basis for sanctioning the professor. The fact that they might express their outrage by making threats to the professor or to the campus only heightens the responsibility of the university to ensure that the professor is capable of continuing to perform their academic duties unmolested. For a university to validate such a “heckler’s veto” by suspending rather than protecting the faculty member will only encourage such campaigns of threats and intimidation. There are far more appropriate steps for a university to take in response to credible threats of violence or disruption that would be compatible with rather than contrary to academic freedom and the university has a responsibility to take such steps.

Unfortunately, your own public statement heightens rather than lessens our concerns about the threat to academic freedom in this case. It is entirely inappropriate for a university president to denounce the scholarly work of a member of the faculty, to associate that work



with criminal activity, or to assert that scholars cannot use their own scholarly language to discuss and analyze their subject matter. It is not appropriate for a university president to shrug his shoulders and say that “[the world we live in today](#)” is not a world in which scholars are “able to debate even the most challenging issues without disruption or threats of violence.” It is a university president’s responsibility to guard the campus against disruption and violence by taking action against those who might engage in disruption or violence rather than taking action against those who are investigating challenging issues. It is not Professor Walker who poses a threat to the campus, and the university has a responsibility to protect Professor Walker from such threats and not to punish them for having been threatened.

There is no doubt that the questions being examined by Professor Walker are important ones. Academia should be a place where such difficult questions can be boldly and honestly investigated. If a scholar’s analysis is mistaken, then it should be rebutted or ignored. But the scholar should not be driven from campus for daring to ask such difficult questions or for reaching the wrong or unpopular answers.

The university is seemingly taking a course of action that encourages those who would silence controversial research and discourages scholars and teachers who must discuss those controversial topics and sometime go against popular opinion. The Academic Freedom Alliance stands with Professor Walker in this moment and calls upon the university to live up to its contractual and constitutional requirements to protect Professor Walker’s ability to teach and research without interference. The university should be transparent about the perceived threats and take immediate steps to implement a plan of action that addresses such threats without suspending a faculty member from their professional duties.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "KW", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Keith Whittington
Chair, Academic Committee, Academic Freedom Alliance
William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Princeton University

cc. Allyn Walker, Professor
Augustine Agho, Provost
Allen Wilson, University Counsel
Bruce Bradley, Rector of Board of Visitors
John Sokolowski, Faculty Senate Chair