



April 25, 2022

Dear President Anderson,

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 dismayed at the recent decision to rescind Professor Edmund Santurri's appointment as Director of the Institute for Freedom and Community. As recently as July 2021, you continued his appointment and recognized his "exemplary" leadership of the Institute. Moreover, that appointment was specified to continue through August 31, 2023 and was to include teaching release and a summer stipend. Succession planning for the Institute was already underway given Professor Santurri's plan to step away from the Institute before the start of the Fall 2023 semester. Professor Santurri's appointment has now been abruptly terminated with more than a year to go in his designated term. It seems quite apparent that the precipitating cause of this decision was the controversy on campus surrounding Professor Peter Singer's public lecture at the Institute in the spring of 2022, though we understand that there has likewise been concern expressed about other speakers brought to campus by the Institute.

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance to protest his premature removal from the directorship of the Institute. No member of the faculty is entitled to hold such an administrative position, but it is a grievous assault on the intellectual climate of the college for the director of a scholarly center to be precipitously dismissed from his post because the intellectual activities of the center offend members of the campus community.

The [stated purpose of the Institute](#) is to explore "diverse ideas about politics, markets and society" and to examine "what sorts of things have ultimate value and what sorts of conditions can be understood as just." Bringing world-renowned philosophers of public morality like Peter Singer to campus to discuss his scholarly ideas with members of the campus community would seem to be entirely consistent with that mission. Far from advancing the mission of the Institute, this decision to rescind Professor Santurri's appointment instead turns its back on that mission and announces that the Institute will not be allowed to expose students and faculty to a diverse range of ideas about politics and society but will instead be sharply constrained so that it does not challenge campus orthodoxies.

The college has promised the members of the campus community, including the faculty, that they will be free to engage in critical inquiry on campus without constraint from the college



administration. The college's [Faculty Manual](#) in Section 4.I.B states that "all members of the St. Olaf faculty shall have full academic freedom." It emphasizes that the "common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free expression," and it commits the college without qualification to the principles and protections recognized in the 1940 American Association of University Professors Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure. Further, the [Faculty Handbook](#) declares that that "St. Olaf College believes that the professor in the classroom and in conference should encourage free discussion, inquiry, and expression."

Beyond those basic obligations, we urge you to consider that colleges and universities are places where individuals with diverse beliefs, ideas and commitments can gather and civilly discuss their views. Colleges and universities are founded on the belief that the free exchange of ideas is essential to the advancement of human knowledge and that our society is improved by working through our disagreements by discussion rather than coercion. Colleges should not shy away from controversy. They should certainly not yield to intimidation. They should be seeking to provide a forum in which disagreements can be openly expressed. Those disagreements will sometimes be intense and might be expressed in strong terms, but colleges will be sacrificing their core values if they seek to suppress speakers who might elicit controversy or silence debate before it has even begun.

By contrast, permitting those who disagree with ideas to cancel events subverts the principles of freedom of speech that ought to guide university life. Justice William O. Douglas observed in *Terminiello v. Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1, 4 (1949) that "a function of free speech under our system of government is to invite dispute. It may indeed best serve its high purpose when it induces a condition of unrest, creates dissatisfaction with conditions as they are, or even stirs people to anger. Speech is often provocative and challenging." The alternative to the robust protection of such speakers and the expression of their ideas is the "standardization of ideas either by legislatures, courts, or dominant political or community groups." In *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234, 262 (1957), Justice Felix Frankfurter emphasized the "dependence of a free society on free universities" and strong protections against "action that inevitably tends to check the ardor and fearlessness of scholars, qualities at once so fragile and so indispensable for fruitful academic labor."

To its credit, St. Olaf College did not cancel the event featuring Peter Singer or allow his critics to disrupt his speech and prevent him from laying out his arguments for members of the campus community to contemplate, debate and accept or reject as they see fit. It is not fitting for a college committed to free inquiry to respond to such controversy by stripping a member of its faculty of a position he has held with honor, and thus acting to insure that speakers like Peter Singer are not brought to campus again. Professor Singer's ideas are controversial and deeply offensive to some, but colleges are supposed to be places where ideas can be taken



seriously, considered carefully, and countered with reasoned argument and not with censorship.

This sudden termination of Professor Santurri's appointment as Director sends a clear message to the campus that some exploration of ideas will not be tolerated and that the college's stated promise that the faculty will have the full freedom to pursue the truth in accord with their scholarly judgment is a hollow one. Professor Santurri has been professionally and materially damaged by this decision, and other members of the faculty have learned that there are intellectual boundaries that they dare not cross. We call upon the St. Olaf College to pay all stipends on top of his base salary as promised in his letter of appointment and to grant his request to be appointed by the chair of the St. Olaf College Board of Regents as a member of the Institute Advisory Board.

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. Prof. Edmund Santurri  
Provost Marci Sortor