



July 25, 2023

Dear Chancellor John Sharp,

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 by the reports that you suspended and launched an investigation of a member of your faculty for comments she made as a guest lecturer in a college class. We are relieved that the investigation was eventually dropped, but it never should have been launched in the first place. This affair shows a disturbing lack of concern with academic freedom principles in the Texas A&M System.

According to [published reports](#), Professor Joy Alonzo in the Department of Pharmacy Practice at Texas A&M participated as a guest lecturer at the University of Texas Medical Branch on March 7, 2023. In the course of her discussion of the opioid crisis, she apparently made critical comments regarding Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick and his policies. When a student in the class complained, she was suspended and investigated by her university and formally censured by the course leaders. Your office was reportedly intimately involved in these activities. The investigation and suspension lasted two weeks, and even though she was cleared of any wrongdoing, university leaders at both the University of Texas and Texas A&M wound up sending out emails that were clearly designed to discourage constitutionally protected speech by members of their faculties in order to avoid offending students or state politicians.

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance to express our firm view that the university's actions represent an egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom and the university's responsibilities under the First Amendment.

Texas A&M is a state university subject to the limits of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as well as its own contractual commitments. As the Supreme Court emphasized in *Rankin v. McPherson*, 483 U.S. 378, 384 (1987), "vigilance is necessary to ensure that public employers do not use authority over employees to silence discourse, not because it hampers public functions but simply because superiors disagree with the content of employees' speech." The [United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit](#) only recently stated in *Meriwether v. Hartop* that the First Amendment does not tolerate state actions "that cast a pall of orthodoxy over the classroom" or that "stifles a professor's viewpoint on a matter of public import." Quite simply, "the First Amendment protects the free-speech rights of professors when they are teaching."



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The American Association of University Professors has long emphasized that the freedom of classroom teaching includes the right of professors to introduce into the classroom controversial but relevant materials. The AAUP's [2007 report on freedom in the classroom](#) emphasized that "ideas that are germane to a subject under discussion in a classroom cannot be censored because a student with particular religious or political beliefs might be offended." It would be "inimical to the free and vigorous exchange of ideas necessary for teaching and learning in higher education" if professors could be sanctioned because of the reaction of one or more students to the words and ideas being discussed. State university professors should be free to express criticism of state government officials and public policy when such matters are relevant to topics under discussion in a class.

A suspension and investigation are in themselves serious sanctions especially, as was the case here, when paired with public condemnations. Such actions should only be taken when there are good reasons to believe that a professor has violated university policies and, in the case of a suspension, when there are serious risks associated with leaving a professor in place. In this case, the university does not seem to have done the minimal due diligence necessary to conclude that there was a credible basis for sanctioning a professor. Instead the university preferred to shoot first and ask questions later in order to mollify the sensibilities of powerful government officials. Such actions are completely inconsistent with the principles of academic freedom that ought to be respected at a serious university, and they suggest that the university would prefer to sacrifice the constitutional rights of members of the faculty rather than risk angering state politicians.

The Academic Freedom Alliance stands firmly behind Professor Alonzo in this matter. The university needs to take explicit steps to reaffirm its commitment to academic freedom and to reassure the faculty that they will not be threatened with termination if they say critical things about state policy when the discussion of such policies is entirely germane to the courses being taught. We call on you to publicly affirm that in the future Texas A&M will adhere to principles of academic freedom and free speech. We further call on you to commit in the future to consulting an appropriate faculty committee "concerning the propriety, the length, and the other conditions of the suspension, as recommended by the AAUP Recommended Institutional Regulations on Dismissal Procedures, and we ask that you comply with the Faculty Senate's request that a clearer and more robust policy be put in place that would implement sufficient safeguards for the imposition of an administrative leave.

State university classrooms are not a "safe space" for state politicians, and university officials should be prepared to explain to state officials that students and faculty have a constitutional right to say critical things about them in the course of their activities in an institution of higher education.



Sincerely,

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

Keith Whittington

Founding Chair, Academic Committee, Academic Freedom Alliance

William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Princeton University (for identification purposes only)

cc. Dean George Udeani

Professor Joy Alonzo

Acting President Mark A. Welsh III

Texas A&M System General Counsel Ray Bonilla

Professor Tracey Hammond, Speaker of the Faculty Senate

Chair of Texas A&M Board of Regents Bill Mahomes