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*\*affiliations are for  
identification purposes only*

**Howard L. Muncy**

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November 12, 2023

Dear President Gayle,

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.

On July 26, 2023, Professor Kendrick Morales received a letter of separation from Provost Bradley Brennan. Professor Kendrick was on the tenure track and the letter terminated his reappointment on that tenure track. The explicit justification offered for his termination hinged on “significant complaints” from students “about certain of your grading practices.” Notably, student grades in Professor Morales’s classes were altered by the senior administration without notice or consultation with Professor Morales.

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance to express our firm view that the college’s actions in altering grades and dismissing a professor due to student complaints about grades are an egregious violation of academic freedom.

Spelman College’s actions in this matter involve important issues at the heart of the academic and scholarly enterprise. Members of the faculty must have the freedom honestly to assess the quality of the academic work of students and their mastery of course materials and concepts. We strongly believe that fundamental principles of academic freedom require assessment of individual student performance to be made by the teaching staff appointed to teach each course.

Academic freedom is essential to higher education’s core mission of pursuing truth and transmitting knowledge in accordance with the expertise and intellectual skills and virtues that are needed for this mission to succeed. Academic freedom must also protect the rights that teachers need to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities to their students, the institutions they serve, the academic enterprise writ large, and the nation that relies upon properly educated graduates. To meet these obligations, teachers must honestly and accurately assess the intellectual progress and performance of their students.

Accordingly, instructors must be able to grade students based on what they honestly conclude, in their professional judgment, is the students’ intellectual



achievement in the course, as determined by criteria that instructors conclude, again in their professional judgment, constitute the best means to truthfully assess proficiency. Instructors must not be punished or disadvantaged for living up to this responsibility. If the grading is done pursuant to an honest evaluation, sanctioning a professor for grading students too rigorously amounts to punishing him or her for being truthful about the quality of the students' work—that is, punishing the instructor for fulfilling the institutional and fiduciary duty to honestly pursue truth. Giving students grades that a competent instructor has concluded, using his or her professional judgment, are not merited is a form of intellectual fraud.

The College's own [Faculty Handbook](#) in Section Two contractually grants professors "the right to determine course content, grading, and classroom procedures in the courses they teach." There is simply no way to reconcile this unqualified right to determine grading with the college administration's actions in this case. There is not even an allegation that Professor Morales was guilty of prejudicial, incompetent, or ideological grading. Without evidence of such manifest abuses or clear error, Professor Morales could not have violated his own duty of "establishing and maintaining reasonable norms for ethical conduct in teaching," and there is no justification for the administration to violate his clear contractual right to determine the grades of students enrolled in his classes.

Moreover, the Faculty Handbook at Section Three, Part II.H.1 specifies that a finite list of "legitimate reasons" to terminate a tenure-track faculty member during their probationary period. The separation letter makes no reference to any of these contractually specified reasons for his termination but merely states that "it would not be beneficial to you or the College to continue our professional relationship further." Given the contents of that letter, the only plausible reason for terminating Professor Morales's employment would be "incompetence" or "failure to carry out obligations to the College with respect to teaching responsibilities and refusal to perform reasonably assigned duties." The allegations outlined in the separation letter, however, do not come close to satisfying those demanding standards. Moreover, there are no allegations in the letter that Professor Morales failed to perform any of his contractually required faculty duties and responsibilities as detailed in Section III, Part IV. If the college was dissatisfied with Professor Morales's teaching performance, it could take that into consideration when he reached the end of his probationary period and was considered for tenure under Section Three, Part III.A. The College could not choose to terminate Professor Morales prior to the end of his probationary period simply because it found his grading practices to be too stringent.

There is a significant risk that educational institutions will subvert their academic mission by compromising their standards in order to satisfy the demands of



tuition-paying students. Institutions of higher education must strive not to become mere credentialing services but instead to be true educational institutions that hold students to high scholarly standards and honestly assess them on their academic performance. Principles of academic freedom exist not only so that professors can expose students to controversial ideas and provide their honest scholarly judgment on the concepts being taught, but also so that professors can provide their honest scholarly evaluation of the academic performance of their students. The educational enterprise is corrupted if administrators can alter the grades of students simply to keep them satisfied and discipline and terminate professors for the sin of holding their students to high academic standards.

The Academic Freedom Alliance expects Professor Morales to be reinstated to his tenure-track position to complete his probationary period in a manner consistent with his and your contractual obligations and with the principles of academic freedom that serious American universities have pledged themselves to protect.

Sincerely,

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

Keith Whittington  
Member, Academic Committee, Academic Freedom Alliance  
William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Princeton University\*

*\*Affiliation for identification purposes*

cc. Vice Provost Dolores Bradley Brennan  
Professor Kendrick Morales