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Claire Shipman
Acting President and
Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees
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Dear President Shipman and Honorable Trustees,

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 writing to express our concerns about Columbia University's treatment of Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman, a tenured professor and department chair at Columbia since January 2005. After reviewing the circumstances, we believe the formal actions taken against Lieberman by Columbia University in February 2022 were a clear violation of his freedom of speech. *The New York Times* [reported](#) on February 23, 2022, about his suspension as chair of the Columbia University department of psychiatry and added that "Dr. Lieberman, who specializes in schizophrenia and is considered one of the leading psychiatrists in the nation, was also removed from his position as psychiatrist-in-chief at Columbia University Irving Medical Center/New York Presbyterian Hospital. That decision is final, according to a spokesman for Columbia University." *Newsweek* confirmed those [reports](#) on the same day stating that they had "obtained an email sent to Columbia University faculty and staff stating that Lieberman was suspended from his role as chair of the Department of Psychiatry at Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, as well as removed as Psychiatrist-in-Chief at CUIMC/New York Presbyterian Hospital, effective immediately." At the same time Lieberman was also compelled to resign as Executive Director of the New York State Psychiatric Institute.

On February 21, 2022, Dr. Lieberman posted on Twitter, in reference to South Sudanese model Nyakim Gatwech, "Whether a work of art or freak of nature she's a beautiful sight to behold." The Tweet led to a reaction on social media and numerous calls for discipline.

However, such a social media post is a form of what the American Association of



University Professors calls “extramural speech.” Extramural speech is a protected form of freedom of expression. When professors “speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline.” As the AAUP has emphasized, “The controlling principle is that a faculty member’s expression of opinion as a citizen cannot constitute grounds for dismissal unless it clearly demonstrates the faculty member’s unfitness for the position.” Columbia University embraced those same principles of academic freedom in Part II, Section VII of the [University Charter and Statutes](#): “Academic freedom implies that all officers of instruction are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subjects; that they are entitled to freedom in research and in the publication of its results; and that they may not be penalized by the University for expressions of opinion or associations in their private or civic capacity.”

Private speech, on a variety of public topics, can sometimes be ill-considered or subject to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. It can sometimes give offense, whether by design or unintentionally. We do not hold such extramural speech to the standards that we would properly expect from speech in the classroom or from scholarly research. Punishing faculty for their speech on social media that some members of the university community find insensitive or offensive will leave all members of the faculty vulnerable to denunciations, investigations, and threats of termination. It will erode the protections for free expression that the university purports to provide to all members of the campus community, including the members of the faculty.

This view was echoed the following week by Columbia faculty member [John McWhorter, who wrote in a NYT op-ed](#): “Dr. Jeffrey Lieberman, a professor of psychiatry at Columbia University and one of the most accomplished and respected psychiatrists in the world, recently tweeted about [Nyakim Gatwech](#), the celebrated American model of South Sudanese descent who is known for her dark skin, [writing](#), “Whether a work of art or freak of nature she’s a beautiful sight to behold ... There’s something amiss if we’re now at the point that someone’s career is to be permanently tarnished and perhaps ended based on a passing error, which started as a misguided attempt at praise and which has been profusely apologized for.”

The repercussions faced by Dr. Lieberman—loss of leadership roles and reputational damage that has impeded if not fatally damaged his academic career—demand rectification. Therefore, the AFA urges Columbia University and the Irving Medical Center to reaffirm their commitment to free speech by reversing the sanctions against Dr. Lieberman. We assume that the actions taken against him and the passage of over three years during which his replacement was appointed, preclude his restoration to his leadership positions. However, at the very least he should be allowed to resume his scholarly, research, and clinical activities. .



Dr. Lieberman should be provided with access to the gift and research funds previously available to him enabling him to hire a research assistant, and he should be given an appropriate office and laboratory space.

We recognize Columbia University's recent leadership transitions and challenges. Addressing this issue proactively would reflect Columbia's dedication to upholding its core values.

Thank you for considering this critical matter. We remain hopeful for a resolution that respects and restores the principles of academic freedom.

Yours sincerely,

Lucas E. Morel
AFA Academic Committee Chair