

October 15, 2024

Via electronic mail

President Michael S. Schill
Northwestern University
633 Clark St
Evanston, IL 60208

CC: Provost Kathleen Hagerty
Chair of the Board of Trustees Peter Bariss

Dear President Schill,

The American Association of University Professors supports the academic freedom of all faculty and students. Northwestern University professor Steven Thrasher is currently facing potential discipline, we fear, for exercising his academic freedom. Despite his exemplary research and teaching record, an ad hoc faculty committee has reportedly been assembled to investigate whether Dr. Thrasher should be sanctioned for alleged antisemitism and “lack of objectivity.” Dr. Thrasher has been summarily placed on leave and suspended from teaching, pending the outcome of this investigation.

Dr. Thrasher, holder of the Daniel Renberg chair in the Medill School of Journalism, is a nationally recognized, decorated journalist and scholar of race, LGBTQIA identity, and infectious disease. The timing of the investigation strongly suggests that university administrators and politicians are interpreting his expression of political beliefs as potential grounds for severe sanctions, including dismissal. Several historians have warned that the current political climate resembles the McCarthy era when thousands of government employees were fired for alleged communist beliefs. We urge the ad hoc committee investigating the Black and Queer Dr. Thrasher not to return us to this draconian past.

These are the facts:

On April 25, Dr. Thrasher and several colleagues formed a human chain between students and police officers at Northwestern’s Gaza Solidarity Encampment in an effort to de-escalate tensions. Dr. Thrasher was reportedly beaten by Northwestern police officers, but no one was charged or arrested.

Then, on June 7, Republican Congresswoman Virginia Foxx, chairwoman of the House of Representatives’ Committee on Education and the Workforce demanded that Northwestern president Michael Schill provide “a list of all faculty and staff disciplinary/conduct cases relating

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to alleged antisemitic incidents at Northwestern since October 7, 2023.” President Schill was called to testify before the committee, where Republican representative Jim Banks derisively referred to Dr. Thrasher as “one of the goons.” Months after the incident at the encampment, for reasons that are unclear, the Northwestern police force filed charges against Dr. Thrasher. Significantly, the State of Illinois refused to prosecute. The university, by contrast, refused to allow the professor to continue teaching. On Friday, Professor Thrasher is supposed to appear before the ad hoc committee.

University presidents across the United States have undoubtedly been forced into difficult positions. But to ban politically expressive faculty from teaching on the basis of what seem to be little more than opportunistic and racialized charges of a “lack of objectivity” suggests an egregious violation of their academic freedom to speak as citizens. Though we hope it won’t come to this, dismissing Dr. Thrasher for political speech would desecrate the very function of the institutions that presidents are charged with leading.

The AAUP urges the Northwestern administration to remain committed to academic due process and academic freedom as well as anti-discrimination regulations designed to protect historically marginalized communities, including Black, Palestinian, and Jewish faculty and students, who are often targeted in this climate of repression.

Sincerely,

Todd Wolfson, President
American Association of University Professors