

## BEGIN NOW TO DEFEND AGAINST HATE AND TROLLING ATTACKS ON SCHOLARS

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In November of 2022, our friend and colleague, Dr. Allyn Walker, was the victim of a trolling attack on their research and their person that resulted in the loss of their position at Old Dominion University (ODU). Centering around misinformation and links to Dr. Walker's identity as non-binary, transgender and Jewish, the attacks began on November 11 when Twitter accounts shared a 54-second excerpt from a 29-minute interview Dr. Walker did with ProStasia Foundation on November 7. The excerpted video was originally published on November 10th on a website promoting hate against trans individuals along with an article titled "Non-Binary' University Instructor Calls To 'Destigmatize' Pedophilia" (scare quotes used in the title). The inaccurate portrayal of Dr. Walker's interview and their work in *A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity* (2022, University of California Press) that was included in both the article and video, set off protests that shook a university unprepared to deal with them. As a result, Dr. Walker was involuntarily placed on Administrative Leave on November 16 at a meeting in which this untenured junior faculty member was confronted by three Vice Presidents, none of whom were from Academic Affairs. Because Dr. Walker was told this was a meeting to offer support, they did not bring anyone else along. This meeting set up a context in which Dr. Walker hired a lawyer to represent them, and eight days later, resigned from the University. Then and now, we are told that every action the University took was out of concern for Dr. Walker's safety and that of the University (for an accounting of what happened and the issues raised see [How Pedophilia Research Led a University to Part Ways With a Scholar \(chronicle.com\)](https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Pedophilia-Research-Led-a-University-to-Part-Ways-With-a-Scholar)).

More and more incidences of faculty being trolled are occurring with stories of varying university responses. Some universities, such as [Oregon State](#), do stand by faculty whose research is attacked. [Rutgers](#), where Dr. Brittney Cooper was attacked at much the same time as Dr. Walker, also seems to know how to respond. And [Syracuse](#) has been praised for its "full-throated" defense of an assistant professor of Political Science.

In response, Universities have slowly begun to develop policies, practices, and procedures for standing up to attacks. The [University of Massachusetts at Amherst](#) has the most comprehensive plan. Two parts of their plan distinguish it. First, it includes a strong declaration of principle –

UMass respects the disciplinary expertise of our faculty, and will defend their right to carry out their scholarly research and their instruction in the classroom. Furthermore, your personal safety will always be protected

and continues with this important statement –

Employment cannot be jeopardized on the basis of public reaction to a faculty member's scholarly research or reasonable classroom instruction.

Second, their response plan explicitly recognizes the role that identity may play in attacks and offers additional resources and guidance.

In addition, examples can be found at the University of Illinois which has prepared a phenomenal resource to assist university officials and faculty in responding to trolling attacks on scholars while also protecting academic freedom and the safety of the faculty and the campus entitled: *University of Illinois, Trolling Attacks on Scholars*, for both [Executive Officer Action](#) and [Faculty Action](#). The [University of Minnesota](#) also provides an excellent example. Finally, [Faculty First Responders](#) offers resources and will consult with faculty members under attack as well as being an important resource for research on the context in which attacks are spreading and the broader political and media infrastructure that supports and encourages them.

Our own university released **Guidelines for protecting scholars and researchers from attacks on social media, message boards, and other online forums** via email to faculty on July 1, 2022, which outlines responses of university units to such attacks. Drawing on the examples of UMass and the University of Illinois, the Guidelines are a positive step. Unfortunately work remains as currently under review is a new *Policy for Civil and Administrative Leave* that puts into policy the involuntary placement of faculty on administrative leave for unspecified safety threats.

We want to highlight three aspects of what happened at ODU that warrant particular attention and to which faculty should be attuned: the role of hate, the use of safety concerns, and the role of faculty groups. *First, though not all who contacted the university were driven by Dr. Walker's identity, the role of hate in initiating the harassment and in spreading misinformation is clear (see Walker, 2022). Knowledge that the role hate can play must be included in preparation for future attacks.* Despite knowledge of how the attacks were initiated, despite the documentation available in emails and letters, and despite leaders on campus who have long

been documenting antisemitic attacks towards themselves and their work on campus, ODU administrators still do not acknowledge the role of hate in what happened to Dr. Walker. If we continue to fail to understand how identity and hate may come into play in trolling attacks, we will be caught off guard once again.

*Second, safety concerns may be used to override policies and procedures outlined in the Faculty Handbook, or other university documents, and faculty must be prepared for this possibility.* In his November 24, 2021 statement at the resignation of Dr. Walker, the President wrote – “We protected freedom of speech. We rejected violence. And, we took the necessary steps to protect life and safety – a prerequisite to the exercise of the academic and other freedoms we cherish. Here, at ODU, safety will always be our first obligation to each of you.” We do not doubt the President’s interest in the safety of the campus. At the same time, we will not forget the fact that this concern for community safety meant the exclusion of a member of that community. Dr. Walker is a real live person with family, friends, pets and a home, who was on the path to obtaining tenure at an institution they were committed. Little concern is given to the harm done to them when the university rejected them just when they needed the support of a strong community. Nor do we forget the fact that those who made the threats go unpunished. They are free to continue their threats, to folks at ODU, to Dr. Walker, to anyone.

It is not clear that ODU would adopt a statement such as the one at UMass, but so far, we have not. In fact, the university is trying to include the use of safety in a new Civil and Administrative Leave policy that gives no protections for those placed involuntarily on leave. Groups on our campus have raised questions about the use of safety from the beginning and will continue to do so. Helpful is AAUP’s 2017 statement [Taking a Stand Against Harassment, Part of the Broader Threat to Higher Education](#) which calls upon university leaders to “...reject outside pressures to remove or discipline faculty members whose ideas or commentary may be provocative or controversial and to denounce in forceful terms these campaigns of harassment.” They write further that any concession to the attackers, including the use of safety concerns to defend responses that discipline, much less remove, faculty from the classroom “...has a chilling effect on the entire academic community...pose a risk to the institution as a whole and to the very project of higher education as a public good.”

*Finally, networks of identity-based organizations on campus can be called on to pressure and inform the administration and offer support to those being harassed, and if these do not already exist on your campus then it is essential to build them now.* At ODU, the campus chapter of AAUP and the University Women’s Caucus were those that spoke up first. Independent groups such as these can react more quickly and decisively, but they take time to develop and, as at ODU, they are not always successful. Today at ODU, groups across campus are working to strengthen their voices and their ties to each other.

Both authors of this essay have long ties and deep commitments to ODU, and the university has earned that commitment over the years. In this instance, however, the administration failed Dr. Walker and all of us. The President’s argument is that he had to do what was done to ensure campus safety, without which academic freedom is not possible. Whatever was done, and all that happened is not clear, those actions led the university to sacrifice a member of our community to hate and fear. Exactly how safe is Dr. Walker now? No one at the university knows. And how safe are the rest of us, when our membership in our community of safety can be taken away in the name of community safety? Those actions also left many of us concerned about the university’s commitment to academic freedom when scholars are attacked. A commitment to academic freedom, as the AAUP 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom reminds us, is essential to the advancement of truth which is at the core of the role of institutions of higher education in the common good. Has there been a chilling effect on research at ODU that could help us uncover the best methods for reducing the victimization of children? Absolutely, we lost a productive scholar in that area. Who knows what the effect has been outside our campus? Finally, as a result of the claim about safety, administrators have resisted acknowledging the role that hate played in the attack and we fear we remain unprepared for future trolling attacks.

We end this essay then with a call to faculty members and ASC to action. It is important that faculty ask now if their universities are prepared to deal with attacks on scholars and their research and have included in their preparation an understanding of how the identity of the researcher and hate against those identities can shape attacks. Faculty must also realize the way their administrators may use safety concerns to defend the actions they take. We must ask ourselves as well, are we willing to sacrifice a member of our community for the feeling of safety? Do we really have to sacrifice academic freedom to be safe of campus? It is too late to ask those questions when someone on the faculty comes under attack. ASC endorsed AAUP’s 1940 *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure* in 2001. We hope that the ASC will continue to endorse AAUP standards and practices – particular regarding removal of faculty from the classroom and the use of safety threats to do so. Our hope is that greater attention to these issues, prompted by faculty, will focus administrators on the problem and the consequences for lack of preparation. Our friend and colleague lost their job because *they* were defined as the problem instead of the transphobic, antisemitic hate that initiated the misinformation campaign. Ultimately, Dr. Walker was punished for the trolling attacks, while the real harm goes unrecognized and unrepaired.

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