

The UT Austin chapter of the AAUP supported two Teaching Assistants whose academic freedom was violated when they were reassigned for expressing support for Palestinian students. We contacted UT administrators to express serious concern about the violation of the students' academic freedom and due process (see our letter below). In response, we have been assured that the students will not suffer loss of income for the Fall and Spring, but we remain concerned that they have been removed from their teaching roles. As we understand it, the matter is now in the grievance process. We call on the administration to restore the students' teaching roles and to publicly reaffirm the University's commitment to academic freedom, which is especially necessary in times of conflict. Dec. 2, 2023.

November 26, 2023

Sharon Wood, Provost
The University of Texas at Austin

Allan Cole, Dean, School of Social Work
The University of Texas at Austin

[Cc: Richard Reddick, Senior Vice Provost for Curriculum and Enrollment and Dean of Undergraduate Studies]

Dear Provost Wood and Dean Cole,

The Executive Committee of the UT Austin Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) is writing to express serious concern about the termination of two teaching assistants in the School of Social Work at The University of Texas at Austin. The AAUP principles on academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance are widely regarded by faculty, college and university administrations, and governing boards alike as the “gold standards” of higher education. These principles were jointly formulated by organizations representing college and university presidents as well as the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The AAUP supports the academic freedom of all classroom instructors, including teaching assistants. The AAUP also supports due process with respect to all matters affecting faculty and teaching assistants. At this polarizing political moment in particular, the AAUP has condemned “the climate of intimidation that now attempts to silence people who express unpopular views on the current conflict in the Middle East.” [[“Polarizing Times Demand Robust Academic Freedom”](#)], Nov. 15, 2023]

The UT Austin AAUP is highly concerned about School of Social Work Dean Allan Cole’s notice of immediate relief of duties and notice of intent not to rehire Teaching Assistants Parham Daghighi and Callie Kennedy. We believe that Dean Cole’s actions violate Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy’s academic freedom, and that they are in clear violation of policies and procedures of The University of Texas at Austin. According to the Handbook of Operating Procedures 9-2050 “[Teaching Assistant and Assistant Instructor Grievance Procedures](#),” Sec. I.C.3.b.i: “If an administrator, other than the provost, determines that immediate discipline is necessary, the following steps will occur: i. The administrator will notify the teaching assistant or assistant instructor in writing, *with copy to the provost, of his or her intent to seek the provost's approval to proceed with immediate discipline*” (emphasis added). In Dean Cole’s November 22, 2023 communications to Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy that we reviewed, only the Vice Provost for Advocacy and Dispute Resolution is copied, and nowhere in the letter does Dean Cole indicate that he intends to seek the provost’s approval. Instead, he writes, “Effective immediately, you are relieved of this work assignment.” While not required, Dean Cole also does not inform Ms. Kennedy or Mr. Daghighi that they have five working days to file a grievance.

In addition to this violation of policy and procedures, we are concerned with the grounds upon which Dean Cole has issued this disciplinary action. Dean Cole writes in his letter to Mr. Daghighi, “On November 16, 2023, you and another teaching assistant sent an unprompted message about the war in Israel to the Women and Madness course. This material was unrelated to the course and inappropriate given the setting.” He also writes that Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy sent the message without the approval of the supervising instructor. However, these facts are incorrect based on documentation that we have reviewed.

First, the TAs’ message was prompted. As they report in their November 16 letter to the students, “Several students have come to us to share about the conflict and how it’s impacting them...” In private conversations with members of AAUP, Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy report that, in particular, a student asked Ms. Kennedy if Dr. Lauren E. Gulbas, the course professor, could acknowledge Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim student mental health in the lecture class because the course is taught by a social work professor and is focused on mental health.

Second, Dr. Gulbas, the supervising instructor, approved the TAs’ message. While Ms. Kennedy and Mr. Daghighi report that Dr. Gulbas said she did not feel comfortable addressing this issue, Dr. Gulbas allowed Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy to draft a message, which she edited. The fact of supervisor approval is corroborated by written communication we reviewed.

Third, Ms. Kennedy and Mr. Daghighi’s November 16 message was related to course material as each aspect of their message is framed within the issues of mental health and harm. For example, in the opening sentence of the second paragraph of their message, they note that they wish to “acknowledge the mental health implications of the current escalation of violence in Gaza.” While in this paragraph they note their disagreement with the UT administration’s “silence around the suffering many of our students, staff, and faculty are experiencing on campus,” they do so because of their concerns around community harm. The next paragraphs in their message share mental health resources and invite others to share resources. Sharing mental health options is something that Signature Course faculty are explicitly asked to do by the Undergraduate College, given that such courses are intended in part to introduce first-year students to UT resources. Their final paragraph expresses their support for “the rights and autonomy of Palestinians, Indigenous people, and displaced peoples across the globe, knowing that oppression results in trauma and negative mental health outcomes that can span generations.” It is important to note that they offer this support because of what mental health research has to say about oppression, which is related to course subject matter.

Based on this evidence, we request that Dean Cole immediately rescind his disciplinary action against Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy. At a minimum, we request that Dean Cole follow the procedure outlined in the UT Handbook of Operating Procedures “Teaching Assistant and Assistant Instructor Grievance Procedures,” Sec. I.C.3.b.i.

However, given the concerns we’ve expressed which indicate that Ms. Kennedy and Mr. Daghighi’s academic freedom may be violated if they are relieved of duties and will not be rehired on the grounds Dean Cole has outlined, we recommend against pursuing this course of disciplinary action at all. The School of Social Work is known for its strong sense of social justice, and this conflict among students (some seeking acknowledgement, others feeling threatened by the same acknowledgment) strikes us as an opportunity for mutual learning rather than for sanctions against vulnerable Teaching Assistants.

We welcome your timely response.

Sincerely,

Pauline Strong, PhD, President, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Karma R. Chávez, PhD, Member-at-Large, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Brian L. Evans, PhD, Past President, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Andrea C. Gore, PhD, Vice President, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Lauren Gutterman, PhD, Secretary, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Steven Seegel, PhD, Treasurer, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Julia L. Mickenberg, PhD, Member-at-Large, UT Austin Chapter, American Association of University Professors

Parham Daghighi and Callie Kennedy hereby give their permission for the public release of their names as graduate students enrolled at The University of Texas at Austin and as graduate teaching assistants employed at The University of Texas at Austin.