January 2, 2025

President, Michael S. Schill

Northwestern University

633 Clark St.

Evanston, IL 60208

CC: Provost, Kathleen Hagerty

Dean Charles Whitaker

Chair of the Board of Trustees, Peter Bariss

Dear President Schill:  
  
The Illinois Conference of the American Association of University Professors Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure is deeply concerned by reports that Northwestern University journalism Professor Steven Thrasher has been suspended from teaching and is facing discipline for exercising his academic freedom.

Since spring of 2019, Steven Thrasher has been an assistant professor of journalism in Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism, Media and Integrated Marketing Communication where he is the inaugural Daniel H. Renberg Chair of social justice reporting. Thrasher holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from New York University and has had a distinguished career as a reporter at the *Village Voice* and National Public Radio and a contributor to a wide range of national publications such as *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Scientific American*.

According to media reports, on April 25, 2024, Dr. Thrasher and other faculty attempted to prevent police from dispersing a pro-Palestinian encampment on campus grounds. At the time, no charges were brought against Dr. Thrasher or anyone else who allegedly interfered with the police clearing operation.

On May 23, 2024, Northwestern University President Michael Schill testified before a House Committee on Education and the Workforce hearing about Northwestern’s efforts to combat antisemitism and respond to pro-Palestine protests on its campus. In his questioning of Schill during the hearing, Congressman Jim Banks (R-IN) singled out Dr. Thrasher as one of the “goons” who “blocked police officers on your campus from doing their job” and pointedly asked whether or not Thrasher would be allowed to continue teaching.

On June 7, Committee on Education and Workforce chair Virginia Foxx (R-NC) sent a letter to Schill complaining that Northwestern was obstructing the committee’s investigation and demanding he send the committee a list of all student, faculty and staff “disciplinary/conduct cases related to alleged antisemitic incidents at Northwestern since October 7, 2023.”

Just three weeks after Schill received Foxx’s letter, at the beginning of July, Northwestern filed misdemeanor obstruction charges against Dr. Thrasher and three other people who were present at the April 25 confrontation. The Cook County State’s Attorney subsequently decided to drop the charges.

On July 8, Dr. Thrasher received a letter informing him that he had been suspended from teaching and that his fall quarter courses were canceled. Medill School Dean, Charles Whitaker shortly sent him an email announcing that the university was initiating disciplinary proceedings against him over student complaints about the inordinate focus on Gaza in one of his courses and about his stated views on journalistic objectivity.

In his May 23rd appearance before Congress, President Schill was specifically asked about banning Dr. Thrasher from teaching and responded: “We believe in due process at Northwestern University.” The fact that Dr. Thrasher has been arbitrarily suspended from teaching without a hearing raises serious doubts about whether Northwestern University truly believes in due process. The fact that Prof. Thrasher was suspended from teaching shortly after a member of Congress publicly demanded his removal, raises serious doubts about Northwestern University’s commitment to due process and academic freedom.

To begin with, Dr. Thrasher’s summary suspension from teaching appears, on its face, to be a gross violation of AAUP regulations concerning suspension and academic due process. The AAUP views suspension from the classroom as a particularly severe form of sanction, one with potentially destructive effects on “the reputation—and the morale” of the suspended faculty member. Freedom to teach is a core component of academic freedom. A complete ban on a professor teaching without due process is a serious violation of the norms of academic freedom that Northwestern University has promised to follow.

The AAUP’s Recommended Institutional Regulations on Academic Freedom and Tenure (*RIR* 5c(1)) stipulate that a faculty member may be suspended “only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by continuance.” *RIR* 5(c) also makes clear that an administration *must* consult with an appropriate faculty committee before suspending a faculty member. Neither condition appears to have been met in this case. Based on the information available to us, Dr. Thrasher’s continued presence on the Northwestern campus appears to pose no threat of “immediate harm” to anyone. And none of the published accounts of his suspension refers to the administration seeking out the recommendation of a faculty committee before suspending him from teaching. It is worth noting that Northwestern’s own faculty handbook requires a hearing before the administration may suspend a faculty member from teaching.

Moreover, the reported reasons for Northwestern’s disciplinary investigation of Dr. Thrasher’s teaching are deeply troubling and suspect.

It is hardly surprising that a reporter whose work focuses on social justice, and who holds an endowed chair of social justice reporting, would focus the content of some of his courses on the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. It would be irresponsible for a journalism scholar specializing in social justice not to teach about the situation in Gaza.

Even more disturbing is the other widely reported ground for this investigation: Thrasher’s views on journalist objectivity. In his July 8 note, Dean Whitaker told Dr. Thrasher that he was being investigated because he had “made statements about the standards of journalism that are antithetical to our profession and values as a University, including but not limited to your declaration… that you do not teach your students to be ‘objective.’” Objectivity is not a requirement for all journalists, and journalism is a profession that encompasses a wide range of different approaches. Objectivity is certainly not a requirement for journalism professors, who must have the freedom to question existing journalistic practices including conventional views about objectivity. Indeed, the ideal of objectivity in journalism has been subjected to criticism by none of other than the late Washington Post reporter and University of California at Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism Dean Ben Bagdikian. Compelled belief in objectivity would be a form of forced speech that is incompatible with academic freedom.

Your administration’s suspension of Dr. Thrasher without due process has already been condemned by the President of the AAUP, Todd Wolfson, in a letter dated October 15, 2024. Moreover, *The Daily Northwestern* reports that several members of Northwestern’s faculty senate have expressed concerns over the disciplinary proceeding to which Dr. Thrasher has been subject.

We have based our interpretation of this affair on published news reports and, in part, on information provided by Dr. Thrasher himself. We realize you may have additional information that would enhance our understanding of the case. We therefore welcome your comments.

Based on our current understanding of what has transpired, Northwestern looks to be in violation of both AAUP Recommended Institutional Regulations concerning academic freedom and due process and provisions of its own handbook. For this reason, we strongly recommend that you immediately reinstate Dr. Thrasher to the classroom. We urge you to drop the University’s specious investigation into his views on objectivity and Gaza, an investigation which by its very nature represents an attack not just on Dr. Thrasher’s academic freedom but on the academic freedom of all Northwestern faculty. And we request that you send Dr. Thrasher a public, written apology for unfairly suspending him and egregiously violating his academic freedom and due process rights.

We welcome any response you have to our concerns, as well as any clarifications or corrections about the facts in this case.

Sincerely,

Steve Macek, Chair, IL AAUP Committee A

and Professor of Communication and Media Studies, North Central College

Diana Vallera, Professor, Photography, Columbia College

John K. Wilson, Academe Blog

Jyotsna Kapur, Professor, Cinema and Media Studies, Southern Illinois University

Jacqueline Battalora, Professor, Sociology and Criminal Justice, Saint Xavier University.

Ribhi Salhi, Professor, Political Science, Harper College