

For Immediate Release

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Ad Hoc Committee Exonerates Steven Thrasher, Northwestern Opens New Investigation

CHICAGO — Dr. Steven Thrasher will resume teaching at the Medill School of Journalism on April 1 after an ad-hoc committee of three professors convened from across the faculty at Northwestern University found no cause for his suspension last fall.

Dr. Thrasher, an assistant professor of journalism and the inaugural Daniel C. Renberg Chair of Social Justice in Reporting at Medill, was placed on paid leave from teaching in September and subjected to disciplinary proceedings following his participation in a student-led demonstration on April 25, supporting Palestinians then under Israeli bombardment in Gaza. Medill Dean Charles Whitaker has accepted the ad-hoc committee's recommendation that no disciplinary action be issued against Dr. Thrasher, but a new disciplinary proceeding is now underway to determine whether his alleged actions last spring violated the faculty handbook.

At the April demonstration, Dr. Thrasher was among a group of faculty who formed a defense line around students who were peacefully setting up tents in Dearing Meadow, on Northwestern University's main Evanston campus. Northwestern Police attempted to break the defense line, physically assaulting Dr. Thrasher in the process.

The assault was caught on video, went viral on social media, and in May was spotlighted at a hearing of the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce. During that hearing, U.S. Rep. Jim Banks (R-Indiana) called Dr. Thrasher a "goon" and unsuccessfully attempted to pressure Northwestern University president Michael Schill into disciplining him.

In June, Dr. Thrasher was one of four employees of Northwestern University (two faculty, one librarian and one graduate student) charged with Class-A misdemeanors for allegedly obstructing police activities during the April demonstration. Cook County's State Attorney declined to prosecute and dropped the charges. Those charges have since been formally expunged from Dr. Thrasher's record.

In July, Medill Dean Charles Whitaker told Dr. Thrasher could not teach while he was being investigated. Dr. Thrasher's fall classes were cancelled without warning. The [Northwestern University, Illinois](#) and [national](#) bodies of the American Association of University Professors (AUUP) all criticized Dean Whitaker's decision to sanction Dr. Thrasher before he was even granted the opportunity for due process (a process which eventually vindicated him).

During Northwestern's Spring Quarter, Dr. Thrasher will teach an undergraduate journalism class "Reading and Reporting LGBTQ Health," in affiliation with the Institute of Sexual and Gender Minority Health and Wellbeing at the Feinberg School of Medicine. He will also teach a doctoral level seminar on the "Practice of Public Scholarship," in affiliation with the Rhetoric, Media, and Publics PhD Program in Northwestern's College of Communication.

"Being a journalist or a professor requires acting on your values even when doing so is difficult, and I am grateful to Palestinian journalists and professors—and to brave student protesters on Deering Meadow, across the country and around the world—for the opportunity to understand and practice what my values are," Dr. Thrasher said. "I look forward to returning to the classroom in April."

Background:

Dr. Steven Thrasher (he/him) holds a PhD in American Studies from New York University. In 2019, he was hired by Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications as an assistant professor of journalism and the inaugural Daniel C. Renberg Chair of Social Justice in Reporting. Dr. Thrasher is an award winning journalist whose work has appeared in *Scientific American*, *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *Esquire*, *New York* magazine, *BuzzFeed News* and the *Village Voice*. His first book, *The Viral Underclass: The Human Toll When Inequality and Disease Collide* (Macmillan, 2022) won a POZ Award for Best in Literature, spotlighting the best representations of HIV and AIDS in media and culture, and was longlisted for the 2023 PEN/John Kenneth Galbraith Award for Nonfiction and for the 2023 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence. He is the co-author, with Afeef Nessouli, of the recent investigation "Queer, HIV-Positive and Running Out of Medication in Gaza" published by *The Intercept*.

Quotes from interested parties:

Dr. Steven Thrasher, Assistant Professor of Journalism and inaugural Daniel C. Renberg Chair of Social Justice at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, Media, Integrated Marketing Communications:

"I am thrilled to be returning to the classroom. And as we see such horrific assaults on the rights of transgender Americans in the opening days of the second Trump administration, I am particularly thrilled to be teaching my class "Reading and Reporting L.G.B.T.Q. Health"—especially considering that class was cancelled in the fall, which was a huge disservice to the students, guest speakers, and members of Chicago's L.G.B.T.Q. communities who take or work to make the class. I will never regret being in solidarity for our students' right to protest, nor for being in solidarity with the people of Palestine

(and especially with Palestinian journalists, more than 200 of whom made the ultimate sacrifice for the ideals of our profession). As the inaugural Daniel C. Renberg Chair for Social Justice in Reporting, it was my duty and my privilege to be in community with our students in Deering Meadow last year—and with oppressed people from Rafah to Rogers Park. Unfortunately, my enthusiasm as I write my syllabi is tampered by yet another bogus investigation Northwestern initiated immediately after lifting my suspension, this time about allegations that I violated the demonstration policy nine months ago. (To be clear, there were no violations of the campus protest policy that was in place at the time.) This new charge comes after being investigated for six months. And while I am told that I will not potentially be terminated or suspended due to this new investigation (for now), this new allegation is meant to intimidate me and keep a cloud of suspicion over my head as I apply for tenure and try to recruit students for my spring courses. This investigation is also about events alleged to have happened nine months ago—well before Northwestern began its first internal investigation. When Northwestern attempted to criminally prosecute me for these alleged events, the State of Illinois summarily threw out the charges before a court date and my record has since been expunged. This new investigation is being brought soon after I was exonerated for the prior disciplinary investigation, and after having been suspended for the entire fall quarter. The timing of this charge supports the argument I made in response to the other investigation: that the discipline is politically-motivated and discriminatory. Despite this harassment from administration, I will remain undeterred. Being a journalist or a professor requires acting on your values even when doing so is difficult, and I am grateful to Palestinian journalists and professors—and to brave student protesters on Deering Meadow, across the country and around the world—for the opportunity to understand and practice what my values are. I look forward to returning to the classroom in April.”

Todd Wolfson, President, American Association of University Professors

“The AAUP is pleased that Northwestern University’s ad hoc committee assembled to investigate professor Thrasher’s participation in a student-led demonstration has adhered to principles of academic due process and that Professor Thrasher will resume teaching at the Medill School of Journalism. A punishment of Dr. Thrasher for political speech would violate the AAUP’s [*1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*](#), endorsed by more than 280 national scholarly and educational associations, which specifically outlines the freedom of professors to speak or write as citizens free from institutional censorship or discipline.

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.”

Jacqueline Stevens, President, Northwestern American Association of University Professors, Professor, Political Science:

“I was pleased to learn that the faculty appeals panel investigating politically motivated charges found Professor Thrasher committed no policy violations. Alas, Dean Whitaker had already suspended Professor Thrasher before the investigation commenced, in violation of AAUP Standards and the Northwestern Faculty Handbook. Now, instead of an apology, Dean Whitaker has initiated a new investigation, this one based on Professor Thrasher's presence on Deering Meadow after the Northwestern University Police arrived, all of which occurred well before Dean Whitaker's first charges from July. The only person so far in this fiasco who is demonstrably interfering with education is Dean Whitaker, who has been baselessly preventing Northwestern students from enrolling in classes they want to take with Professor Thrasher. It is hard to think of a more glaring violation of academic freedom than the actions taken by Dean Whitaker and the Northwestern Board of Trustees, to whom the Northwestern University Police report.”

Steve Macek, Vice President, Illinois Conference of the AAUP

"Northwestern's cancellation of Professor Thrasher's fall 2024 courses and protracted disciplinary investigation into his teaching were clear-cut violations of his academic freedom and right to academic due process. The circumstances surrounding these actions strongly suggest they were motivated by outside pressure brought by politicians and others. We are thrilled that the ad hoc disciplinary committee has found in his favor and , in so doing, affirmed the right of Northwestern faculty to engage in bold, critical inquiry and extracurricular speech without fear of retaliation."

Palestine Legal

"We are thrilled to hear of Professor Thrasher's reinstatement, especially at a time when professors across the U.S. are being targeted—and in some cases even terminated—for speaking out against genocide. Educators are being forced into a position of cognitive dissonance, where their principles are at odds with their practice. Professors who teach from a social justice perspective are expected to suddenly detach their teachings from their actions. We commend Professor Thrasher for his commitment to the truth. While Northwestern has suspended him for taking a stance against genocide, it has failed to take action against professors who [make openly anti-Palestinian remarks](#). We urge

Northwestern to honor its commitment to academic freedom and to stand against the Palestinian exception."

Victor Ray, sociologist and co-organizer, with Kiese Laymon, of [a letter of support](#) for Dr. Thrasher signed by more than 2,800 scholars, writers and journalists:

“Universities, including Northwestern, have touted their commitments to free speech, diversity, and academic freedom as central to America’s democratic project. By persecuting pro-Palestinian scholars such as Dr. Thrasher, Northwestern supports the very authoritarianism it allegedly opposes. Dr. Thrasher is an award-winning, internationally renowned journalist Northwestern has vilified for his pro-Palestinian advocacy. Dr. Thrasher was hired as the Daniel H. Renberg Chair for Social Justice in Reporting in recognition of his longstanding commitment to using journalism to afflict the powerful. It is ironic (and embarrassing) that Northwestern continues to target Dr. Thrasher for applying the principle of unwavering solidarity with marginalized people he was hired to promote.”

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