Tuesday August 11, 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:

As Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure of the Illinois conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), we are writing to express our concern and alarm at the suspension of Professor Steven Thrasher from teaching his classes during the spring 2025 quarter and the 2025-26 academic year following denial of tenure.

This is not the first time Northwestern’s Administration has taken actions toward Prof. Thrasher that appear to violate AAUP Recommended Institutional Regulations. On January 7, 2025, we wrote to you about two earlier violations of Prof. Thrasher’s rights: The abuse of Northwestern’s police powers by the administration ordering his retroactive arrest months after a campus protest, and the suspension of Prof. Thrasher from teaching on inadequate grounds in the fall of 2025.

But this letter addresses a much more serious violation of Prof. Thrasher’s rights, because it includes both his academic freedom and due process rights, and the extraordinary assertion by the Northwestern administration that it can suspend any professor from teaching without due process, contrary to fundamental AAUP standards and Northwestern’s own policies.

The Northwestern University Faculty Handbook specifies, “The academic year following the tenure review is either the faculty member’s first year with tenure or the terminal year (non-tenure-eligible) on the faculty.” During the terminal year, the faculty member is entitled to all of the rights to due process and academic freedom held by other faculty, including the right to teach.

Northwestern’s Faculty Handbook specifies that professors can only be suspended from teaching following a strictly-defined process of filing charges based on specified criteria that must protect academic freedom.

In extraordinarily rare circumstances of extreme danger or misconduct (none of which are alleged here), a professor can be subject to an interim suspension pending a full hearing. However, the failure of the administration to file any subsequent charges against Prof. Thrasher makes the interim suspension inherently illegitimate. Even if the interim suspension in spring 2025 could somehow be justified, that logic cannot apply to a suspension for the entire year, when there was plenty of time to follow due process procedures.

The fact that Prof. Thrasher was suspended from teaching in advance for the entire academic year proves that this action could not be due to lack of enrollment in classes he was qualified to teach or any other plausible reason.

In fact, the administration did publicly provide a reason for suspending Prof. Thrasher from teaching, in a letter sent to him following his tenure denial: “Your public lobbying, mischaracterizations and efforts to encourage pressure from groups complicate and compromise the process of tenure review, decision making, and appeal. Therefore, we are concerned about your presence with students in our community.”

This letter is not so much an explanation as a confession: It is an open admission that Northwestern’s administration violated Prof. Thrasher’s academic freedom and due process rights.

Almost every professor who is denied tenure disagrees with the decision. Professors are completely free to publicly criticize any tenure decision, even when the administration disagrees with their characterization.

The assertion that professors who criticize the administration should not be allowed to have a “presence with students in our community” is a threat not just to Prof. Thrasher’s academic freedom but also to the freedom of every single faculty member at Northwestern.

If Prof. Thrasher’s criticism of the tenure decision is unjustified, then Northwestern officials are free to criticize him and present counter-evidence. But they are not free to punish him or ban him from teaching in retaliation for his views. Even if Northwestern administrators feel constrained in discussing the details of tenure decisions, this cannot justify censoring a professor from discussing the tenure system in ways that do not violate any confidential information.

While certain aspects of the tenure process might be deemed confidential, this tradition applies to the university, not to the faculty candidate. Tenure is not a secret action. Any professor is free to announce the result of their own tenure decision, and to express their pleasure or displeasure at the result, without punishment based on their viewpoint about it. Like any other administrative decision, a tenure decision can be subjected to criticism by any faculty member and these opinions are protected by academic freedom.

Commentary about tenure decisions is a subset of extramural utterances known as intramural utterances, which concern university operations. The purpose of the “intramural utterances” category is to protect extramural utterances about the university even when a faculty member might be expected to participate in university committees and other work related to university operations.

Public lobbying is a fully protected activity by a professor seeking to encourage public pressure to influence an administrative decision. As for the accusation of “mischaracterization” against Prof. Thrasher, it does not justify any of these actions against him. Claims of mischaracterization are a common part of public debate and do not in themselves constitute the kind of serious professional misconduct that justify investigation or punishment. Although the administration has not publicly offered any evidence of mischaracterization, it is difficult to imagine any circumstance where an allegation of “mischaracterization” could justify an investigation, and certainly not an interim suspension or other punishment. The Northwestern Faculty Handbook makes no mention of “mischaracterization” as a punishable offense.

The AAUP guidelines state, “Extramural utterances rarely bear upon the faculty member’s fitness for continuing service.” Certainly extramural utterances about a tenure decision cannot have any connection to Prof. Thrasher’s fitness as a journalism professor, since his professional work does not involve tenure decisions.

The ban on teaching during the terminal year is not only a clear violation of Prof. Thrasher’s right to academic freedom, it is also a violation of the rights of Northwestern students to hear from their professors.

The administration’s authority to assign classes cannot be used as an excuse to suspend professors without due process. If this “discretion” theory were true, then there would be no need to have any process for suspending faculty from teaching, since the administration can effectively do so for any reason it wishes. If these procedures for suspension from teaching exist in the Northwestern University Faculty Handbook (as they do), and are required by AAUP standards (as they are), then it must not be possible to simply ignore them at the whim of an administrator responsible for assigning classes.

The administration’s authority to assign office space cannot be used to justify punishing a professor without due process by arbitrarily banning a professor from utilizing space on campus. The administration’s authority to issue library privileges cannot be used to arbitrarily ban a professor without due process from reading books in the library. When the administration has discretion, it still must be used in according with the Faculty Handbook’s guarantees of academic freedom and due process.

Banning a professor from teaching without due process, even if they are still being paid, is a violation of both AAUP procedures and Northwestern’s own rules, which specify the process for suspending a professor.

If Northwestern has the power to ban professors from teaching without due process, why–when it sought to ban Prof. Thrasher from teaching in the fall of 2024–did it allow a faculty committee to review its teaching suspension and why did it correctly follow that committee’s recommendation to restore Prof. Thrasher from the classroom? The fact that Northwestern’s administration refused to follow the same due process it had followed a few months earlier for the same suspension of Prof. Thrasher from teaching is essentially a confession that it knew there was no adequate basis for the current suspension.

Suspensions from terminal year teaching by universities are extraordinarily rare (and far less common than other violations of academic freedom). The only recent similar case we are aware of occurred in 2007, when DePaul University banned Norman Finkelstein from teaching during his terminal year after denying him tenure.

The AAUP wrote a [letter](https://znetwork.org/znetarticle/aaup-writes-depaul-yet-again-by-american-association-of-university-professors-aaup/) to DePaul strongly condemning the terminal year suspension, where it noted: “Action to separate a faculty member from ongoing academic responsibilities prior to demonstration of stated cause in an appropriate proceeding is considered to be a suspension, which is justified, according to the enclosed joint 1958 Statement on Procedural Standards in Faculty Dismissal Proceedings, ‘only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by continuance.’ According to Interpretive Comment Number 9 on the 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, ‘a suspension which is not followed by either reinstatement or the opportunity for a hearing is a summary dismissal in violation of academic due process.’”

These standards remain fundamental to both the AAUP and to Northwestern, which is a member of the AAC&U that co-authored the 1940 Statement of Principles and 1970 Interpretive Comments, and which follows these standards in the Faculty Handbook by guaranteeing these protections to faculty.

The AAUP’s letter to DePaul quoted the AAUP’s report on the 1965 termination of faculty at St John’s, where the AAUP firmly rejected any view that paying a professor suspended from teaching was adequate: “denial of their classroom was, in itself, a serious injury. To inflict such injury without due process and, therefore, without demonstrated reason, destroys the academic character of the University.” According to the AAUP 60 years ago, the case for academic freedom is predicated on “the basic right to employ one’s professional skills in practice, a right, in the case of the teaching profession, which is exercised not in private practice but through institutions. To deny a faculty member this opportunity without adequate cause, regardless of monetary compensation, is to deny him his basic professional rights.”

By denying Prof. Thrasher his right to teach during his terminal year and his right to due process, Northwestern’s administration is not merely violating its own clear policies, it is also violating more than 60 years of well-established and clear-cut professional standards on academic freedom.

The terminal year exists as a recognition that tenure denial is not in any way the same as a finding of professional incompetence. The terminal year is intended to allow a professor the opportunity to pursue an academic career in the future by enabling a professor to continue their work in the teaching profession. By suspending him from teaching, Northwestern deprived Prof. Thrasher of the opportunity to practice and improve upon his teaching during the terminal year, and remain current with pedagogical practices.

Worst of all, Northwestern’s suspension has caused Prof. Thrasher irreparable harm by smearing his reputation without adequate justification. Any other college considering the hiring of Prof. Thrasher would understandably interpret Northwestern’s ban on his teaching as a judgment that he is a bad teacher, or poses a danger to his students.

Therefore, we recommend that Northwestern undertake the following actions:

Northwestern’s administration should formally rescind its arbitrary and unjust suspension of Prof. Thrasher, and offer Prof. Thrasher the opportunity to teach his classes in the upcoming academic year. Because Prof. Thrasher, upon being banned from teaching, understandably pursued other avenues and received a prestigious fellowship to continue his work, he should be under no obligation to accept this offer.

Northwestern’s administration must repudiate its false claim that professors can be banned from teaching without due process based on “discretion” in teaching assignments.

Northwestern’s administration must issue a statement of the fact that Prof. Thrasher’s teaching has never been determined by his peers to violate professional standards.

Northwestern’s administration should issue an apology to Prof. Thrasher for depriving him of teaching opportunities without due process, and to students at Northwestern who were deprived of the opportunity to benefit from his teaching.

Northwestern’s administration should create a process to ensure that chairs, deans, and other administrators do not abuse their power by using discretion in making teaching assignments to penalize professors for their protected expression, and allow for a faculty body to hear appeals against unfair treatment in teaching assignments.

Although this letter is focused on the suspension of Prof. Thrasher during his terminal year, the severe violations of due process and academic standards we have detailed, and those described in our earlier letter about Prof. Thrasher, raise serious concerns about the fairness of his tenure denial itself. We do not have sufficient evidence to make any judgments about Prof. Thrasher’s tenure case, but when an administration has egregiously violated the academic freedom rights of a professor three times in the span of a year, it is not difficult to imagine it happening a fourth time. Therefore, we request that Northwestern’s administration provide assurances and evidence that it fully respected Prof. Thrasher’s due process rights in the tenure decision and did not seek to violate academic freedom by penalizing him for his protected expression.

Sincerely,

Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure of the Illinois conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)

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

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