

# Old Criticisms, New Threats

**IHE** [insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/26/professors-are-often-political-lightning-rods-now-are-facing-new-threats-over-their](https://insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/26/professors-are-often-political-lightning-rods-now-are-facing-new-threats-over-their)

Professors have long been political targets. But a spate of recent threats against scholars -- including two that have led to campus closures -- is raising fresh concerns about safety and academic freedom.

The American Associations of University Professors “is definitely concerned about this trend, which I think is a fair description of what is happening,” said Hans-Joerg Tiede, senior program officer for academic freedom and tenure at AAUP. “We will continue to monitor it and consider what other actions we can take.”

First, a roundup of cases:

- In early May, [Tommy J. Curry](#), associate professor of philosophy at Texas A&M University, faced death threats and race-based harassment for talking about violence against whites in a 2012 podcast interview about the gory Quentin Tarantino film *Django Unchained*. Portions of Curry's opinions were quoted in right-wing publications, where he was portrayed as advocating violence.
- Bret Weinstein, a professor of biology at Evergreen State College, was in May [warned to stay off that campus](#) by security officials after he questioned the logic of a student request that all white students and faculty members stay away during a day of protest. The college temporarily shut down after further threats and demands from some students that Weinstein be fired.
- Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, an assistant professor of African-American studies at Princeton University, [canceled planned public talks](#) this month, saying she received hateful messages and death threats for criticizing President Trump in a commencement speech at Hampshire College.
- [Sarah Bond](#), an assistant professor of classics at the University of Iowa, faced threats and harassment -- some of it anti-Semitic -- after publishing a piece in *Hyperallergic*. She argued that classicists should do more to highlight the fact that statues were often painted and so not necessarily reflective of the “classical ideal” now equated with white marble. Bond's views are widely backed by scholars in her field.
- At Syracuse University, [Dana Cloud](#), a professor of communication and rhetoric, was the subject of threats and harassment after she tweeted for counterdemonstrators to join her and “finish off” a dispersing group of protesters against Islamic law.
- Most recently, [Johnny Eric Williams](#), an associate professor of sociology at Trinity College in Connecticut, said he had to flee town due to threats -- and the campus shut down for a day -- after conservative news websites shared Facebook posts he made about race. He used the hashtag #LetThemFuckingDie in response to an online article about racism of the same name. Some have argued he was advocating violence against whites, but he's since said he was referring to systemic racism.

The AAUP has condemned such threats against scholars and asked some individual institutions to support targeted faculty members. It also earlier this year published a set of [institutional recommendations](#) for dealing with online harassment of professors. Several faculty-led petitions express support for colleagues in the crosshairs, and the American Sociological Association also weighed in to defend Williams.

“The ability to inject controversial ideas into [the public] forum is paramount to a better understanding of our society and essential to ensuring a robust exchange of ideas on college campuses,” reads [the sociologists' statement](#). “In principle, ASA does not take a position on such ideas themselves but does take the position that all individuals have the right to express themselves. In that context, we expect thoughtful consideration regarding the way in which the ideas are expressed. We also expect the safety of those expressing them.”

Threatening the lives “of those whose rhetoric we oppose undermines the robust and democratic exchange of ideas,” ASA said. “Ideas -- regardless of how controversial -- should only be attacked by alternative ideas. Mutual understanding requires more discussion rather than a stifling of discourse.”

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education has long advocated answering offensive speech with more speech, not less. Calling threats against professors as “depressing” a trend as violent responses to campus free speech, Will Creeley, an attorney with FIRE, said Friday that such threats require “unequivocal condemnation from all Americans who care about the health of our democracy.”

Threatening violence “against those who hold opinions different from one’s own is a particularly evil form of censorship,” Creeley [wrote on FIRE’s website](#). “To be clear: responding to speech with threats is morally repugnant, illiberal and potentially illegal.”

In each recent case, Creeley added, “the faculty member who received threats had engaged in plainly protected political speech, typically involving contentious issues like race relations. If our nation’s faculty members cannot evaluate and express opinions on the issues of the day without being subjected to violent threats, the U.S. Supreme Court’s stark warning in [Sweezy v. New Hampshire](#) will prove prophetic: ‘Teachers and students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding; otherwise our civilization will stagnate and die.’” (In that 1957 case, the high court found that a state investigation into the alleged Communist affiliations of a guest lecturer at a university was unconstitutional.)

### **Colleges and Universities Respond**

Creeley also endorsed AAUP’s statement earlier this year in which it said campus governing boards “have a responsibility to defend academic freedom and institutional autonomy, including to protect institutions from undue public interference, by resisting calls for the dismissal of faculty members and by condemning their targeted harassment and intimidation.”

Institutions, meanwhile, have had mixed responses to threats against scholars. Texas A&M, for example, first condemned Curry’s comments but then softened its tone against him. That followed criticism from colleagues who said the university needed to back Curry and his right to academic freedom.

Syracuse first clarified that Cloud’s comments were not intended to provoke violence, but Chancellor Kent Syverud offered more support in a follow-up statement last week.

Saying he’d received messages insisting that he “denounce, censor or dismiss” Cloud for her speech, Syverud said, “No. We are and will remain a university. Free speech is and will remain one of our key values. I can’t imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth thriving here without free speech.”

He continued, “Our faculty must be able to say and write things -- including things that provoke some or make others uncomfortable -- up to the very limits of the law. The statement at issue is, I believe, within those limits. I intend to act accordingly.”

Many scholars and civil liberties groups have engaged in protests like those Cloud encouraged. They have argued that since there is in fact no movement to impose Islamic law in the U.S., protests against it are really designed to encourage more general anti-Muslim sentiments.

Trinity’s administration, meanwhile, said it is looking into Williams’s comments and expressed disapproval of his hashtag.

Williams has since said he’s [left the state](#) to protect his family. He also issued a campuswide apology, saying, “I am sorry ... I regret that the hashtag that I quoted from the title of an article was misinterpreted and misperceived as inciting violence and calling for the death of ‘white’ people.”

The professor said he never intended to “invite or incite violence.” His only aim, he said, “was to bring awareness to white supremacy and to inspire others to address these kinds of injustices.”

In another case, Essex County College doubled down last week on its [suspension of Lisa Durden](#), a communications adjunct and pop culture pundit, after she appeared on Fox News to defend Black Lives Matter protesters' right to all-black protest spaces on Memorial Day. She has now been terminated, NJ.com [reported](#).

“The college was immediately inundated with feedback from students, faculty and prospective students and their families expressing frustration, concern and even fear that the views expressed by a college employee (with influence over students) would negatively impact their experience on the campus,” Anthony Munroe, the college’s president, said in a statement Friday. “I fully believe that institutions of higher learning must provide a safe space for students. ... The character of this institution mandates that we embrace diversity, inclusion and unity. Racism cannot be fought with more racism.”

The University of Delaware also distanced itself from Kathy Dettwyler, an adjunct professor of anthropology, who said on Facebook that Otto Warmbier, a college student who recently died after imprisonment in North Korea, “got exactly what he deserved.” Warmbier was “typical of a mind-set of a lot of the young, white, rich, clueless males” Dettwyler teaches, she wrote, prompting the university to call her remarks “particularly distressing” and not in line with its values, according to the [Associated Press](#). The university subsequently said that Dettwyler [would not be rehired](#).

### Questions About Self-Censorship

A number of professors facing threats have attributed the deluge to slanted coverage of their public comments by various conservative news websites. Many of those reports have since been cited by [Professor Watchlist](#), which launched earlier this year “to expose and document college professors who discriminate against conservative students and advance leftist propaganda in the classroom.”

Asked about threats facing professors on the list, Matt Lamb, a spokesperson, said via email that harassment “against anyone for their views, whether it be professors, students or politicians, is terrible. Whether it is [Lars Maischak](#) threatening President Trump for assassination, [Eric Clanton](#) throwing bike locks at Trump supporters or John Griffinsaying Republicans should be [lined up and shot](#), harassment and death threats are terrible and should be widely denounced. Likewise, threats against professors are just as bad as when leftist professors threaten other people. We oppose all forms of violence.”

Cloud, at Syracuse, said she hasn’t apologized “or made excuses for what I said, because that would serve a narrative that is blaming these faculty, rather than understanding these campaigns as right-wing political strategy on the part of people who do actually espouse violence.”

The emergence of the “hard right, including bona-fide fascists, is a product of the Trump moment,” she said, since “his rhetoric emboldens them, and this latest wave of attacks is scarier as a result, even if the messages I and other professors have received share features with earlier waves.”

Tiede, of AAUP, said that Professor Watchlist and its ilk are part of a broader attack on the “core values” of higher education, such as “serving as spaces where ideas can be explored, where dissent can occur and where the truth can be investigated,” which is “how they support our democracy.” All these functions have been attacked in the past, he said, but are now enabled with new technology.

As for self-censorship, Tiede said some professors probably do censor themselves due to reports of harassment. Given that faculty members have been targeted for comments “concerning difficult social problems, including racial justice, it is worrisome that public discourse on important topics to which faculty members can bring their expertise may be curtailed as a result,” he said. It’s worrisome as well that some campuses have shut down over threats, he said.

Matthew Hughey, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Connecticut, recently wrote about his own experiences with threats in an [op-ed](#) in *The Huffington Post*.

"In early 2017 I was scheduled to give a talk that examined the role of overt and subtle racialized messages to magnetize white support for particular political parties and political platforms and how those strategies played a role in the 2016 election," he said. Various conservative publications misrepresented some of his arguments, even after an appearance on Fox's *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, leading to a few death threats, online name-calling, "over 400 emails, nearly 50 voice mails and even a couple dozen snail-mail letters. ... Campus detectives got involved. Local police had to patrol my home."

Echoing the underlying argument of his *Huffington Post* piece, Hughey wrote in an email to *Inside Higher Ed* that the common thread in many harassment cases is race -- specifically "that folks seem to be getting attacked when they critique whiteness."

### **What Do Critics Want?**

A few of the aforementioned cases have little to do with [whiteness](#), or critiques of what being white means as a social construct. But most do focus on issues of race.

Hughey said he felt supported by UConn. As for self-censorship, he said professors "always have an obligation to speak wisely (regardless of what's going on), but they also have the freedom to use their personal social media as they see fit."

If universities are going to "praise and link to faculty Twitter accounts when we publish an article, win an award, etc.," he added, "then they need to have our back when the attacks start on Twitter or when we say something less than popular and/or provocative, or share something that people might disagree with."

Hughey and others have argued that attacks on scholars appear coordinated. If that's true, a shared strategy speaks to a shared goal. So what do critics who resort to intimidation want? Tiede said it was hard to define clearly, but he thinks certain groups and individuals clearly would "prefer not to have the expertise of faculty members publicized when those run contrary to their interests."

The AAUP observed in 1915 that the social sciences in particular faced a "danger of restrictions upon the expression of opinions which point toward extensive social innovations, or call in question the moral legitimacy or social expediency of economic conditions or commercial practices in which large vested interests are involved," he added. "I don't see any need to modify that observation today."