

# Academe Blog

The blog of Academe magazine

<https://academeblog.org/2017/06/29/expressions-of-gratitude-for-aaup-for-recent-censures/>

## Trinity Places Williams on Leave; Fails to Defend Academic Freedom

Hank Reichman / 1 week ago

BY HANK REICHMAN

The shocking [story of Trinity College professor Johnny Williams](#), target of racist harassment and death threats that led to a one-day shutdown of Trinity College, has taken another ominous turn. Today Trinity College President Joanne Berger-Sweeney issued the following [statement](#):

June 26, 2017

To the Members of the Trinity Community,

As a follow-up to my note from last week, I write to inform you that Professor Johnny Williams has been placed on leave, effectively immediately. We've determined that a leave is in the best interest of both Professor Williams and the college. The review by the Dean of the Faculty of the events concerning Professor Williams will continue.

Meanwhile, I want to take care to note that the principles that underlie this particular set of events go far beyond the actions of any one person. These involve principles that concern how we think about academic freedom and freedom of speech, as well as the responsibilities that come with those fundamental values. It's true, too, that as scholars and citizens, and as individuals and as a community of higher learning, our roles in and relationship to social media and the public sphere are complicated. We must be able to engage in conversations about these difficult and complex issues, and Trinity College and other places like it are precisely where such conversations should occur. I, for one, welcome them.

Sincerely,

Joanne Berger-Sweeney

It is, of course, possible that Professor Williams agreed voluntarily to this leave or may even have requested it in order to protect himself and his family. He has, after all, been in hiding out of state since the threats against him accelerated earlier this week. But were that the case, at minimum, one would assume that this would be a leave with full pay and publicly acknowledged as mutually agreed upon.

Moreover, under AAUP standards, a faculty member should be suspended prior to a faculty hearing “only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by continuance.” Further, the AAUP says the administration should consult with a faculty committee “concerning the propriety, the length, and the other conditions of the suspension.” However, the statement makes no indication that anything like this was done, suggesting that this “leave” is probably involuntary and that it is possible Professor Williams has been suspended without pay or due process. The statement offers little clarification on what actions the college now plans to take other than to promise a “review” by the dean. One can only hope that the college’s policies and procedures afford Professor Williams appropriate due process protections and that these will be followed.

Nonetheless, by placing Professor Williams on leave while at the same time failing to publicly defend — even minimally — his rights to freedom of expression and academic freedom, the statement suggests that Trinity’s president is abdicating her moral authority as an academic leader. The second paragraph of the statement is — as I’m certain most readers of this blog will agree — one of the most astonishing examples of meaningless mealy-mouthed double-talk ever to come from the pen of a college president — and that’s a pretty high bar! It sadly speaks volumes for itself. I might also add that Trinity has yet to publicly reject — or even respond to — the highly inappropriate calls by Connecticut state legislative leaders for Williams’ summary dismissal.

Contrast Berger-Sweeney’s flabby message to the strong response this week of Syracuse University Chancellor Kent Syverud to demands that his university fire Professor Dana Cloud for her controversial tweet. I haven’t been able yet to access the full text of Syverud’s statement, but here is how it [has been reported](#):

Syracuse University Chancellor Kent Syverud had an abrupt response for anyone calling him to fire a vocal, radically liberal professor:

“No,” Syverud wrote in an email to the campus community last week. . . .

Syverud said in his statement that he had recieved messages calling for Cloud to be fired or disciplined from people who interpreted her comments to involve violence.

He said she and the university rejected this interpretation.

“They insist that the University — and that I — denounce, censor, or dismiss the professor for her speech,” Syverud said, refusing to concede.

“I can’t imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth thriving here without free speech,” Syverud wrote. “Our faculty must be able to say and write things — including things that provoke some or make other uncomfortable — up to the very limits of the law.”

The two cases are eerily similar. In Williams’ case he was accused of making racially inflammatory remarks on a Facebook post by employing a hashtag that implied victims of the recent shooting of Republican congressional figures should have been left to die. Williams, however, made no specific reference to that incident but instead called attention to a fatal police shooting of a black woman in Seattle as exemplary of white supremacy. Williams later [apologized publicly](#) for his use of the hashtag, however. In Cloud’s case she was among counter-demonstrators at a “March Against Sharia” rally, where she tweeted that the counter-demonstrators were outnumbering the “fascists” and called on reinforcements “to finish them off.” Both posts could, perhaps, be construed as calls to violence, although neither had anything remotely like that effect. But in both instances right-wing online media soon pounced on them and, as has become all too common, vile threats and harassment — using language that could ONLY be construed as promoting violence — ensued.

In addition to the fact that Williams apologized for his post while, to my knowledge, Cloud did not, the only real difference between these incidents is that Cloud’s chancellor demonstrated principles and a spine and, well, one can only wonder about Trinity’s president.

A petition in support of Professor Williams is being circulated online; you can sign it [here](#). In addition, I urge people to write President Berger-Sweeney directly to demand that she explicitly defend Johnny Williams’s academic freedom and that of the Trinity faculty as a whole and that she rescind any and all disciplinary actions against him. She may be reached at [joanne.bergersweeney@trincoll.edu](mailto:joanne.bergersweeney@trincoll.edu) or on Twitter at @JBergerSweeney.

And if you haven’t already done so, please sign the AAUP’s [petition against targeted threats and harassment](#).

# Academe Blog

The blog of Academe magazine

[https://academeblog.org/2017/06/27/trinity-aaup-statement-on-the-decision-to-place-professor-johnny-williams-on-leave/?link\\_id=2&can\\_id=87493765e5e0c0ce525b302ba741bb4a&source=email-rinity-chapter-of-the-aaup-statement-on-the-johnny-williams-suspension&email\\_referrer=rinity-chapter-of-the-aaup-statement-on-the-johnny-williams-suspension&email\\_subject=trinity-chapter-statement-on-the-johnny-williams-suspension](https://academeblog.org/2017/06/27/trinity-aaup-statement-on-the-decision-to-place-professor-johnny-williams-on-leave/?link_id=2&can_id=87493765e5e0c0ce525b302ba741bb4a&source=email-rinity-chapter-of-the-aaup-statement-on-the-johnny-williams-suspension&email_referrer=rinity-chapter-of-the-aaup-statement-on-the-johnny-williams-suspension&email_subject=trinity-chapter-statement-on-the-johnny-williams-suspension)

## Trinity AAUP Statement on the Decision to Place Professor Johnny Williams on Leave

Hank Reichman / 1 week ago

*The following statement on [the suspension of Professor Johnny Williams](#) was issued by the Executive Committee of the Trinity College AAUP chapter. This morning Inside Higher Ed [reports](#) that “Williams said he was told by a dean that he was taking leave whether he wanted to or not, and that Trinity made its decision in ‘the best interest of the college, not for my family and me.’ It’s ‘not in the interest of safeguarding academic freedom and free speech,’ he added. ‘It is my hope the administration corrects its course’.”*

In response to the College administration’s decision to place professor Johnny Williams on leave, we as the Executive Committee of Trinity College’s AAUP chapter think it important to express publicly the following concerns. We appreciate that the attack on Johnny happened very rapidly, and that the administration had to respond quickly, under threat, and with limited information. We also appreciate that the administration is accountable to a number of different constituencies, including trustees, donors, alumni, students, parents, and the general public.

However, we are still troubled that, after a tenured black professor received death threats in response to speaking out against white supremacy on a personal social media page, the administration’s default response was to lend credence to a politically motivated attack specifically designed to stifle critical engagement with issues of race. The other choice would have been to strongly support Professor Williams in the face of such attacks.

We are also troubled by the fact that the email sent out by President Berger-Sweeney on Wednesday, June 21 was worded in ways that seemed to confirm the validity of the

Campus Reform allegations. The relative public silence since, including from the Dean of Faculty, has been disquieting.

In stark contrast to the administration's response, Professor Williams has thus far received overwhelming support from the academic community. A petition in support of Professor Williams gathered over 2300 signatures in four days. An open letter of support from the Trinity community received over 650 signatures in two days. These numbers continue to grow. The American Sociological Association issued a statement on June 22nd affirming that "the ability to inject controversial ideas into this forum is paramount to a better understanding of our society and essential to ensuring a robust exchange of ideas on college campuses" and that "threatening the life of those whose rhetoric we oppose undermines the robust and democratic exchange of ideas." We agree, and we are frankly appalled that our own administration has so far been unwilling to make a similarly clear statement endorsing the principles that are so necessary for conducting our work and lives safely and without threat of reprisal.

We believe that the decision to put Professor Williams on leave should not be made out of institutional expediency but rather by those directly under threat: that is, by Professor Williams and his family. Moreover, we are not convinced that this decision is in the best interest of the campus community. Insofar as the administration is genuinely concerned about protecting the community, we urge them to join us in our fight to protect scholars who engage with issues of race, and to dismantle the institutional structures that make such difficult and uncomfortable conversations necessary.

We are particularly concerned about the implications that this decision has for issues of academic freedom and scholarly inquiry on campus, and the precedent that it sets. We have significant doubts about whether this decision is consistent with the College's rightful and laudable attempts to build a diverse and critically engaged academic community. In conversations we have had among the faculty a common theme is: "If the administration is not going to stand up for Johnny Williams despite his international stature as a first-rate scholar on issues of race and society, who are they going to stand up for?" In these situations, we expect nothing less than a full-throated endorsement of academic freedom. We expect that the administration's first impulse should be to protect and affirm the College's faculty, rather than encourage the inaccurate and damaging interpretation of Professor Williams' comments and to allow these attacks on academic freedom and personal safety to go unchallenged.

We are concerned now not only about the situation involving Professor Williams and his family, but also about the College's ability to create a safe and protected environment for all of us — students, faculty, and staff alike — who engage with issues that are socially and politically controversial, including but not limited to issues of race. Professor Williams made his comments on a personal social media page, which he has every right to do under the First Amendment. As such, we do not see how this administration

manages to reach the conclusion that this is germane to his ability to effectively do his job (which should be the only grounds for forced leaves, suspensions, terminations, and the like). But, like Professor Williams, many of us engage in productive scholarship that grapples with these important and politically sensitive issues, in the classroom, the broader academic community, and in our personal and social spheres of influence. We do it, in part, because we have been — up to now — reasonably sure that our administration would protect us under the auspices of academic freedom if necessary. It is difficult to see how we can maintain that confidence in light of recent events.

We are concerned about the College's tacit capitulation to a nationwide trend of attacking other scholars, such as George Ciccariello-Maher, Steven Salaita, Keeanga-Yamahtta-Taylor, Lisa Durden, Dana Cloud, Sarah E. Bond, Tommy Curry, and earlier Saida Grundy who also work on critically important and politically sensitive issues. Scholars of color and those opposing racism and sexism have increasingly been targeted. As African American Studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor wrote, after she was forced to end a national speaking tour following a similar campaign of conservative vitriol, "The threat of violence, whether it is implied or acted on, is intended to intimidate and to silence." Accordingly, we cannot continue to respond to the hate directed towards Johnny Williams or any similar incidents as if they were singular and disconnected. When George Ciccariello-Maher was condemned by Drexel University after his tweets were taken out of context, The Daily Stormer, an anti-Semitic website, proudly declared, "This is what winning looks like." We fear that by placing Professor Williams on leave the Trinity administration becomes complicit in encouraging further attacks of this sort.

Other institutions have done a far job better in protecting the academic freedom of their scholars than the current administration of Trinity College. For example, Syracuse University Chancellor Kent Syverud responded to similar intimidation tactics against Prof. Dana Cloud writing, "I can't imagine academic freedom or the genuine search for truth thriving here without free speech. 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."

The Trinity College administration would be wise to consider how a failure to boldly defend academic freedom might affect the College's ability to attract and retain scholars who work on controversial issues, our reputation as a liberal arts college that encourages independent thought, and in attracting students who are interested in learning about these issues.

It is also deeply troubled that the administration's response appears to be inconsistent with our own faculty manual, which is grounded in AAUP principles. Appendix B of that manual states that faculty members are citizens as well as professionals, and that

“when he/she speaks or writes as a citizen, he/she should be free from institutional censorship or discipline.” Yet it appears that our administration has clearly violated this policy: they have subjected Professor Williams to institutional discipline for speaking and writing as a citizen. Worse still, this clear violation significantly undermines our trust in the administration’s capacity to act in accordance with the policies and procedures detailed in the manual.

We demand that this administration reverse course and immediately issue: a public apology to Johnny Williams; a denouncement of the attacks against him; and offer an unequivocal endorsement of academic freedom. We also demand that the administration begin working with faculty governance committees and the AAUP to put policies in place that protect faculty from such attacks in the future.

–Executive Committee, Trinity College’s Chapter of the AAUP