

Targeted Harassment—Faculty Report Back

BY ANITA LEVY

“IF YOU HAVE BEEN TARGETED as a result of something you have said in your classroom, in your publications, or outside work . . . we want to hear from you!” The AAUP sent this call to faculty members in spring 2017, as the impact of the 2016 presidential election reverberated through college campuses. AAUP staff had begun receiving reports from faculty members about experiences of targeted harassment and intimidation, and we knew that the election had worsened a political climate already inhospitable to academic freedom. Continuing and new efforts by privately funded right-wing groups to monitor the speech and conduct of faculty members had heightened our concerns.

In their responses to our call, individual faculty members reported being singled out for sustained harassment and intimidation primarily as a result of comments they had made, or were alleged to have made, in public presentations, in scholarly publications, on blogs, on social media, or in the classroom. In many cases, they reported that the triggering event occurred in the course of their normal academic duties as teachers, researchers, or concerned citizen-scholars addressing the public.

Here are some of the stories we received.

- A full professor of surgery at a large state university was targeted for online harassment as a result of his public advocacy for fact-based science and, in particular, his campaign against antivaccination misinformation. The harasser made repeated allegations against the professor, including accusations of theft and defrauding the government. The professor had to alert patients to the harassment campaign in order to protect his professional reputation and his medical practice. The targeted harassment continues as of this writing.
- A student taking a course that included content related to fracking and climate change demanded the right to use outside sources on climate change without consideration of their scientific merit and still receive an A in the course. When the professor responded by requiring students to use data from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to support their arguments, the student dropped the course. The student then contacted a well-known “alt-right” student publication, which published an article about the course that included the syllabus with the faculty member’s phone number, email address, and office hours unredacted. The professor received threatening emails and became the subject of hateful commentary when the story went viral on Twitter. The student went unpunished by the administration.
- A faculty expert on crop science who blogs, tweets, and speaks publicly on biotechnology and genetically modified organisms was trolled on Twitter with threats because of the subject matter of his postings and presentations. When the professor tweeted critically about the online publication of an article on pesticides in a major news magazine that did not identify the author as a paid corporate activist, the professor was targeted with a broad public records request.
- The name of a Jewish professor whose research and publications focus on critical whiteness studies

was posted on white supremacist websites, along with the names of other Jewish scholars in the same field. The professor was also listed under an anti-Semitic Twitter hashtag, along with her photograph, with the caption characterizing her as an attacker of “White identity.” Other individuals listed under this hashtag are also Jewish, among them social activists, immigration lawyers, and scholars who work on social and racial justice, presumably deemed to pose a threat to whiteness.

- A conservative online student newspaper published an article about a faculty member’s requirement that students use Modern Language Association style guidelines for assignments, including gender-inclusive language. After the right-wing website Campus Reform picked up the story, Fox News interviewed a student who had complained about losing one point on a writing assignment for having failed to use gender-inclusive language. The original article went viral and the professor who taught the course received hundreds of threatening emails, many of them violent and misogynistic, and dozens of telephone calls of a similar nature.

The AAUP continues to track incidents of targeted harassment at <http://www.aaup.org/harassment-stories>. We urge administrations, governing boards, and faculties to speak out in defense of academic freedom and to condemn targeted harassment of faculty members.

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