

## Trinity College AAUP Chapter

THE AAUP CHAPTER at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, was created in April 2017. Within six months, its membership more than tripled, from seventeen to fifty-three. Faculty had begun to organize following the 2016 presidential election amid concerns about how to protect undocumented students and those with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status. Trinity College president Joanne Berger-Sweeney responded to the ad hoc faculty group's calls to make Trinity a sanctuary campus by promising to do anything possible within the limits of the law to protect these students. Faculty wanted a stronger commitment from the administration and decided to increase their impact by establishing a more formal group.

After forming an AAUP chapter at the end of the academic year, members expected to resume activity in the fall, but the controversy surrounding sociology professor Johnny Williams mobilized chapter leadership over the summer. Trinity had placed Williams on involuntary leave after reports on the right-wing website Campus Reform misrepresented his social media postings on racial issues, resulting in violent threats to Williams and the campus. A group of sixty colleagues demanded that the administration rescind its decision, and the chapter's executive committee issued a statement of support for Williams, citing concerns about academic freedom, due process, and the stifling of "critical engagement with issues of race." More than one hundred Trinity faculty members signed a statement noting that the decision to place Williams on leave was a clear violation of AAUP standards. Chapter leaders consulted with the national AAUP, which sent a

letter urging Berger-Sweeney to reinstate Williams. The administration ultimately acknowledged that Williams's posts were protected by academic freedom, though Williams agreed to remain on leave during the fall semester.

Trinity College AAUP members have been building on the momentum of this victory and continue to play an active role in articulating faculty concerns on campus and improving faculty governance. Solidarity with all faculty—whether on tenured, tenure-track, or contingent appointments—and with other campus workers and students has remained a top priority for the chapter.

We learned more about the new chapter from members of its executive committee.

### *What role did the Johnny Williams controversy play in the rapid growth of your chapter?*

Trinity College faculty were positioned to respond rapidly and coherently to the attacks on Johnny Williams because we were already organized with the AAUP. The existence of a chapter on campus gave faculty an official platform from which to speak and an organized structure for making decisions and expressing opposition to the administration's handling of the situation. The administration's decision to unilaterally place Professor Williams on leave, however, was just the latest example of a general decline in working conditions and faculty governance and a trend of prioritizing the demands of other "stakeholders" over faculty concerns. By crystallizing these existing grievances, the administration's failure to defend Williams from his right-wing attackers galvanized the faculty. Many who did not previ-

ously see the importance of organizing with the AAUP were deeply troubled by the apparent lack of protection offered by tenure. And many more who already had grievances saw the importance of being organized and speaking in a unified political voice.

### *Although your chapter helped win a victory for academic freedom at Trinity College, the administration's handling of the case raised ongoing concerns. How do you envision the chapter working with the administration in the future?*

Trinity College's faculty manual is organized around AAUP principles, which creates clear structures for shared governance. The administration's unilateral action to place Williams on mandatory leave in response to the Campus Reform attack, despite the fact that the faculty manual clearly leaves issues of suspension and sanction to the faculty, was disconcerting. Our goal moving forward is to reinforce existing faculty governance structures and challenge administrative overreach. This fall alone we have raised objections to efforts to change various policies that sought to centralize decision-making in the dean's office rather than involve the appropriate faculty committees. So far these objections have been met with fair-minded responses from the administration, and we are hopeful that our relationship with the administration will continue to be productive in the future.

### *As your chapter moves forward, what are the major issues members want to focus on and how are you working to define and advance your agenda?*

In addition to committees focusing on expanding membership and

organizing events, our Contingent Faculty Committee is identifying issues important to non-tenure-track faculty. Our Sanctuary Campus Committee works to ensure that the college has the best policies in place to protect undocumented members of the Trinity community and to network with statewide and national coalitions to help protect immigrants from deportation. Another committee is laying the groundwork for a campuswide labor network that we hope will bring together campus unions, exempt and nonexempt employees, faculty, and students. Our Committee on Issues Affecting Faculty of Color is preparing to advocate for greater hiring and institutional support for faculty of color. Finally, our College Governance Committee is documenting and responding to threats to faculty governance.

***What are some of the obstacles you have encountered to organizing faculty at Trinity and what are your strategies for overcoming those obstacles?***

Our greatest strength as a chapter has been that many of the members of the executive committee have been non-tenure-track and nontenured faculty—our first executive committee consisted of six members, only two of whom had tenure. So the realities of economic inequality and the tenuous nature of academic freedom protections have always been at the heart of our organizing. However, especially after the Johnny Williams controversy, a number of contingent and junior faculty felt particularly vulnerable. What would have happened if Campus Reform had attacked a nontenured faculty member? We responded to these concerns this fall by greatly expanding the size of the executive committee and

involving more faculty on contingent appointments. By involving more people in planning, discussion, and organizing, we can better shield potentially vulnerable faculty members. More work needs to be done, however, to strengthen solidarity between tenured and tenure-track faculty and those on contingent contracts.

***Tell us about work the chapter has done to engage staff and students. What motivated these efforts and what results are they yielding?***

First of all, our chapter has worked hard to make sure that the administration clarifies its position on the protection of undocumented members of our community. Now that we are clear about what the administration is willing (and unwilling) to do, we have been reaching out to organizations and lawyers in the community who work on issues of forced deportation. Our hope is that building such bridges will enable our AAUP chapter to expand protections for undocumented members of our community. We also organized a number of public events for faculty and students this fall, including a lecture by Johnny Williams on the first day of the semester, a teach-in about academic freedom and white supremacy, and film screenings and public lectures. The chapter will be stronger when it works closely with other employees and with students from across campus.

***Your chapter was in frequent contact with the national AAUP during the Williams controversy. How was that helpful, and what kind of support would benefit your chapter and other advocacy chapters like it in the future?***

The national AAUP was extremely important this summer during



▲ A September 2017 public talk by Johnny Williams drew a large crowd on campus.

the Williams controversy. AAUP first vice president Henry Reichman wrote a piece for *Academe Blog* that gave us a sense of the contours of the situation early on. Hans-Joerg Tiede and other staff members were incredibly helpful as we crafted our public responses, including by providing material from AAUP statements to frame and support our positions. The letter Tiede sent to the administration condemning its decision to place Williams on suspension also provided powerful support for the positions being taken by our chapter. Tiede later came to campus and gave a series of lectures on academic freedom both inside and outside the classroom. We were also impressed by the AAUP's ability to magnify our voice over the summer, when the Association informed faculty from around the country about Williams and encouraged them to sign petitions and send support. Funding from the state AAUP conference made it possible for a member of our executive committee to attend the AAUP's Summer Institute last July.

Because right-wing attacks on academics can happen at any time, on any campus, we highly encourage all campuses to organize their own chapters of the AAUP and to work closely with the national office to develop a greater understanding of the principles and protections of academic freedom. ■

*Does your chapter have a story to share? Write to [communications@aaup.org](mailto:communications@aaup.org) to be considered for a chapter profile in *Academe*.*