

Monday, August 24, 2015

Provost Daniel Linzer
Northwestern University
633 Clark Street
Evanston, IL 60208-1101

Dear Dan,

It is with a sense of deep sadness and frustration that I write to resign my position as Professor of Clinical Medical Humanities and Bioethics, effective August 31, 2015. I have enjoyed a memorable and productive decade at Northwestern University. So much good has come from this position, for me and for the people I have tried to help through my work. I will always be grateful to my students and colleagues at Northwestern as well as to the librarians and administrators (including you) who for many years supported my work.

When in early 2014 I learned that my dean, Eric Neilson, had given the order to censor Bill Peace's article in the issue of *Atrium* that I edited, it seemed like a cosmic joke, or perhaps a publicity stunt being arranged by Penguin Press. I was doing the final fact-checking, lawyering, and page-proofing of *Galileo's Middle Finger: Heretics, Activists, and the Search for Justice in Science*, which, as you know, is a book about academic freedom that focuses particularly on researchers who get in trouble for putting forth challenging ideas about sex. I could not believe my own dean would censor an article because it recounted a consensual blowjob between a nurse and a patient in 1978.

Compounding this abuse was the subsequent institution of what we in the program called "the censorship committee"—a new "editorial" committee formed to thereafter approve all content of *Atrium*, a committee including representatives of the dean's office and the PR department. Katie Watson, editor-in-chief of *Atrium*, had one meeting with this group and appropriately decided "no more."

Although remaining publicly silent on a serious case of censorship made me feel like an abject hypocrite, I stayed quiet about the censorship and the formation of the censorship committee for as long as I did out of fear for my program colleagues' jobs. None ever told me that she or he was afraid for her or his *own* job, but they frequently mentioned being worried for the jobs of *others* in the program, and suggested we had better not anger Dean Neilson further.

Nevertheless, when Kristi Kirschner moved to resign over this issue in late 2014, I found myself distraught at the thought of losing her. At that point, in December of 2014, I met with Vice Dean for Education Diane Wayne and Vice Dean for Academic Affairs Bill Lowe. The meeting was positively Orwellian, and I gave up and left after only 20 minutes. After I explained to them that I had a major book coming out on academic freedom, and that I was being put in an untenable position with respect to the censorship of *Atrium*, their only response was “congratulations on your book.” I made clear that if they restored *Atrium* in full, I would stay quiet about the censorship, but that otherwise I could not stay quiet forever. They made clear they intended to “monitor” *Atrium*. They said that work they paid for was work they could control, but had no answer to my follow-up questions about whether that meant I should run all of my journal article manuscripts, book manuscripts, op-ed manuscripts, and even potential blogs and tweets past them.

In April of this year, you kindly invited me to meet with you to talk about my book, which had been published the month before. I took the opportunity to discuss the censorship of *Atrium* with you, and we had a follow-up email exchange. But nothing changed. A month later, Bill Peace and I had had enough, and I told Diane Wayne we were going public. She responded, “At the current time we have no objection to Katie reposting the prior published *Atrium* issues on the humanities and bioethics website.” Disgusted that the fear of bad publicity was apparently the only thing that could move this institution to stop censorship, and wondering what “at the current time” was supposed to mean, Bill Peace and I finally decided to go public.

Thereafter, on May 26, 2015, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) wrote to President Morton Schapiro and Dean Neilson to object to what had happened. FIRE told me that universities almost always respond to their letters, but I predicted Northwestern would not. Sadly, I was right.

In recent weeks, I have appealed to you to acknowledge the censorship and to assure me it will not happen again. What I got in response from you on August 12 was this statement:

I have discussed academic freedom, in general, and Atrium, specifically, with the Dean of the Medical School. Both he and I assure you of the importance of academic freedom, and that the University and the Medical School take very seriously our commitment to academic freedom in terms of the publication of a journal that we have agreed to publish. Indeed, when the editor of Atrium requested that the back issues be made available again online, reversing that editor's previous decision, those issues were immediately restored to the web site.

The ongoing publication of any journal depends on a number of factors that are quite distinct from academic freedom. The approval and support of the Medical School or the University for publication of a journal that bears the institution's name would depend on the publication making a significant contribution to our educational and scholarly mission. Other considerations are if faculty are actively involved as editors and writers so that the journal really represents the efforts of the University, and if the journal's readership and impact are substantial enough to justify the expense and effort of production and distribution. The decision of an institution whether or not to publish a particular

journal in no way restricts individual faculty from publishing their academic work in other suitable journals.

I found this very disappointing. In point of fact, the suggestion that Katie Watson was to blame for the censorship of the journal—when she clearly acted in fear in response to Dean Neilson’s order—is misleading, unfair, and insulting. It places responsibility on the wrong person and evades the institution’s responsibility for the censorship.

What happened here had *nothing* to do with an institutional decision whether to fund some new proposed journal in the future. In this instance, Dean Neilson gave the order to censor an *already-published* article in an *ongoing* journal, an article that had been peer-reviewed, prior to publication, by multiple Medical Humanities and Bioethics faculty members, including Kristi Kirschner, Kathryn Montgomery, and me.

The plain and simple fact is that Dean Neilson acted impulsively and wrongly in this situation. We all make mistakes, but this was a profound mistake that cut to the very heart of academic freedom. It should have been acknowledged and corrected immediately. That is most definitely not what happened. Instead, what happened was denial, avoidance, blame-shifting, and evasion. To this day, the university has not admitted its mistake, and it has not affirmed its commitment to academic freedom in a way that makes clear that similar incidents will not occur in the future. This failure should be embarrassing to an otherwise great university.

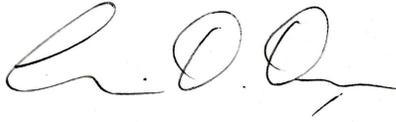
As a consequence, I now find myself in the painful position of having to choose between the work I do—which has been and presumably always will be high-risk and controversial—and loyalty to my colleagues, who are reasonably afraid that my work might further irritate the dean in the future, with unpredictable consequences for them and for our program. I cannot continue to work in such circumstances and in such an institution. Vague statements of commitment to the principle of academic freedom mean little when the institution’s apparent understanding of academic freedom in concrete circumstances means so little. Hence, my resignation.

As you know, because you were kind enough to read it, my most recent book, on academic freedom, was made possible because I came to Northwestern University. It happened because, as I took on one controversial issue after another—first the Bailey transsexualism controversy, then the Chagnon/Tierney fiasco in American anthropology, then the prenatal dexamethasone intervention disaster—university leaders defended my academic freedom when they received often sharp criticisms of my work. Time and again, my academic freedom was protected by Northwestern University. Northwestern University enabled me to work effectively and confidently, for a full decade, in the service of the disempowered and the wronged. For that, I am deeply grateful.

But I no longer work at *that* institution. I no longer work at a university that fearlessly defends academic freedom in the face of criticism, controversy, and calls for censorship. Now, I work at a university at which *my own dean* thinks he has the authority to censor my work. An institution in which the faculty are afraid to offend the dean is not an institution where I can in good conscience do my work. Such an institution is not a “university,” in the truest sense of that word.

Thank you for engaging with me about this matter. I do appreciate that, as well as the support you gave me over the years. I will miss working for the real Northwestern University very much.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Dreger', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Alice D. Dreger, Ph.D.
Professor of Clinical Medical Humanities and Bioethics