

Article

# Yes, We Can! Academic Freedom Alliance: A Model of Organizational Response to Academic Censorship<sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** Censorship of scholars suppresses academic freedom. In this article, we describe how academic communities can unite to defend academic freedom. We present the story of the Academic Freedom Alliance – a single-cause, non-partisan organization dedicated to the protection of academic freedom – as an example of an organizational response to censorship and the suppression of scholarship.

**Keywords:** censorship; academic freedom; DEI; cancel culture

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## Why We Care about Academic Freedom and How We Can Defend It

Censorship of scholars in their research capacity or in the classroom is a suppression of academic freedom. But why do we care about academic freedom in the first place? Francesca Minerva, editor of the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, explained it eloquently in her address to the conference Censorship in the Sciences: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Krylov & Tanzman, 2025):

When academic freedom is under threat, we end up hindering the pursuit of truth....We end up with the distortion of the nature of academia....And when we do not pursue the truth..., we end up failing students....We also fail society at large because non-academics have an interest in benefiting in what academics have discovered when they do their job properly and without restriction.

Thus, academic freedom is essential for scholarly research across the arts and sciences and in the professional disciplines to function, for students to be educated, and for society to prosper.

The numerous examples of censorship and scholarship suppression presented at the conference raise the fundamental question: What actions can we take to protect scientists and other scholars from illiberal attacks undermining freedom of inquiry? The session “Organizational and Institutional Responses to Censorship” provided some ideas. This session made clear that, although we face grave problems in academia today, we are not helpless. We have agency and can fight back. As described by the speakers, in response to the ideological capture of legacy institutions (universities, professional associations, honors societies, academic publishers, etc.), a variety of organizations have been created. Examples include the American Academy of Sciences and Letters, the Society for Open Inquiry in Behavioral Science, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, the Association for Mathematical Research, the National Association of Scholars, and Free Black Thought. In this article, we introduce the Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA),<sup>1</sup> an example of successful organizational response to censorship in academia.

## What Is the AFA and How Was It Founded?

As amply illustrated by the talks at the conference, academic freedom is under threat and needs to be defended. The AFA is an educational, non-profit organization<sup>2</sup> launched in 2021 with this explicit purpose. Formation of the AFA began in the summer of 2020. The founders were a small group of professors who were concerned about a climate of conformism, intellectual intolerance, and fear that had emerged in academia. By March 2021, the organization had grown into a national effort and was publicly launched with 217 founding academics alongside 12 prominent attorneys who serve on its legal advisory council. As a non-partisan organization, the AFA boasts an impressive membership from across the political spectrum. Prominent committee members include Janet Halley from Harvard University, Robert George from Princeton University, Keith Whittington from Yale University, as well as distinguished First Amendment legal advocates such as Floyd Abrams, Nadine Strossen, Lisa Blatt, and Paul Clement.

The mission statement of the AFA is straightforward:

The Academic Freedom Alliance is an alliance of college and university faculty members who are dedicated to upholding the principles that are required for scholars to fulfill their vocation as truth-seekers and for colleges and universities to be faithful to their mission as truth-seeking institutions.

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<sup>1</sup> Its website is at [link to the article](#).

<sup>2</sup> AFA is financed by grants and donations from a broad base of supporters comprising over 1000 individuals and foundations.

What is the underlying idea behind the AFA? Professor Robert George described it using a colorful metaphor from the animal kingdom (Yang, 2021). When zebras are attacked by predators, they scatter and run away, making each one of them vulnerable. When elephants are attacked, they circle around the weakest and defend themselves together, which makes even the most vulnerable of them safe. Traditionally, academics have acted like zebras in the face of threats to their academic freedom. The AFA is formed for academics to act as elephants.

The AFA's approach to protecting and advancing academic freedom is multifaceted and is based on four elements:

- Peer support;
- Safety in numbers;
- Provision of legal support to deter and resist punitive administrative actions;
- Education and outreach.

There is safety in numbers – it is harder to target several hundred academics than a single one. It is easier to fight back when you know you are supported by a reliable group of peers. The Alliance has grown in just four years to include nearly 1000 members. Such a coalition of scholars has been strategically designed to deter university administrators who may attempt to isolate and unjustly punish an AFA member for protected speech.

Beyond the “strength in numbers” concept, the two most direct forms of action that the AFA takes are: (i) providing funding for the legal defense of scholars (members and, under certain circumstances, non-members) who may be facing disciplinary action, and (ii) raising awareness of the significance of academic freedom and contemporary threats to it, whether they come from inside universities or outside them. This “sword and shield” strategy seeks to impose a cost on universities and colleges that unjustly target scholars with threats and intimidation, while at the same time educating a larger audience about why academic freedom is important.

Without a credible threat of legal action, it is easy for an administrator facing a shouting mob to throw a professor under the bus – such punitive actions have included drawn-out investigations, mandated trainings, suspension, loss of pay, withdrawal of professional titles, letters of reprimand, and firing. But when the administrator needs to weigh the rage of activists against the cost of legal action, things are viewed differently. As the AFA's lawyers say about academic freedom: “If we cannot celebrate it, we will litigate it.”

## **AFA's Portfolio: Overview and Examples**

In the organization's short history, the AFA has provided legal defense funding totaling over \$500,000 to more than 30 scholars who have either been under investigation or have been punished by university administrators. Of these cases, the AFA has achieved outright victory in 22, with the remainder either ongoing or on appeal. The AFA has not experienced a final legal defeat to date. As the AFA is a non-profit organization, its primary law firm (Allen Harris, PLLC) provides the organization with a discounted hourly rate, and has also secured pro bono representation on some cases. The legal support provided so far would have cost nearly a million dollars for individual scholars had they gone it alone. This amplifying effect serves the vital interests of the individuals the AFA assists and is an encouragement to its donors, who are passionate about defending academic freedom.

Examples of the AFA's most prominent victories include:

- Timothy Keiderling, who challenged a required training at Princeton Theological Seminary (Taylor, 2021).
- Jeffrey Poelvoorde, who challenged Converse College's mandatory diversity training (Dallmeyer, 2020).
- William Moravits, who sued St. Phillip's College for his wrongful dismissal for protected speech (Muncy, 2023).
- John Strauss, who was suspended and subjected to a lengthy investigation by the University of Southern California for an encounter with pro-Palestinian student protestors (AFA, 2024a).

Here we highlight two recent cases relevant to Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine (STEMM) from the AFA's portfolio. As these cases suggest, STEMM faculty are not fully aware of how fragile their academic freedom is.

Professor Maitland Jones (see Figure 1) was teaching organic chemistry at New York University (NYU). He is a distinguished educator, a recipient of multiple teaching awards, and an author of a popular undergraduate textbook. In 2022, students complained that Professor Jones was grading too rigorously in his organic chemistry course. In response, the university dismissed him (Bartlett, 2022). Supported by the AFA, he and NYU reached an agreement to his satisfaction.



**Figure 1:** Left: Professor Maitland Jones, Jr. (Image source: Janice Chung, *The New York Times*, Redux). Right: Cover of popular organic chemistry textbook co-authored by Professor Jones.

Michael Joyner is a professor and doctor at the Mayo Clinic. He was threatened, punished, and effectively silenced by his employer for comments he made to the media about transgender ideology in athletics and the bureaucratic response to Covid-19. The AFA has assisted Dr. Joyner from the very beginning of the controversy. The case has made it past Mayo's motions for dismissal and has gone through discovery (AFA, 2024b). A trial has been scheduled for fall 2025.

Although many of the AFA's cases are confidential, we can (anonymously) share recent praise the AFA received from a professor in New York, whom it assisted with an issue concerning pronouns. He wrote to us:

Your support was crucial. Your intercession effective. The time and effort you spent intervening in my case are truly appreciated. The work you do is important, and you have my most grateful thanks. Three cheers to you and the AFA.

Another professor in Louisiana whom the AFA assisted sent this message:

The issue was dismissed with no action being taken. Since the matter has been adjudicated, I guess that [my university] cannot now use anything about the situation against me. Many thanks for your help!

Among current cases, the AFA is assisting Kendrick Morales against Spelman College in Georgia. Morales was fired when he complained that administrators changed his students' grades without his knowledge or approval (Quinn, 2023). In this case, a complaint has been filed, and the case is awaiting Spelman's response.

## Educational Advocacy

The AFA also works to educate academics and administrators on the importance of academic freedom. The AFA's educational advocacy of academic freedom is advanced through public letters to administrators (to date, 35), podcast episodes (16), published interviews with leading scholars (19), and position statements (5). The AFA runs a public relations operation, which issues press releases to a large number of major publications when the organization issues letters calling out censorious administrative actions against faculty.

The AFA has also developed a 10-point approach titled "First Steps to Defend Yourself in a Free Speech Controversy" (see Figure 2). The approach is posted on the AFA home page, and well over 1000 print copies have been distributed at conferences around the country. An extended version of this advice was published as an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Downs et al., 2021).

The AFA has received coverage in nearly all leading legacy media outlets and publications focusing on higher education. These have included the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, *National Review*, *Fox News*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Campus Reform*, and *Inside Higher Ed*. The AFA's podcast and interviews have featured individuals such as former Purdue president Mitch Daniels, Harvard professor Steven Pinker, Harvard Medical School professor and former dean Jeffrey Flier, author Jonathan Rauch, and many other renowned experts speaking to academic freedom concerns. The AFA website has been visited by over 130,000 users with just under 1 million page clicks. Its account on X has nearly 5,000 followers and has received over 2.5 million impressions. In addition, the AFA's mailing list has over 4,000 subscribers.

## Public Policy Advocacy

To date, the AFA has issued six position statements on issues related to academic freedom:<sup>3</sup>

- AFA Calls for an End to Required Diversity Statements in Federal Grant Funding (July 18, 2024).

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<sup>3</sup> The statements are available at [link to the article](#).

- Joint Letter on Institutional Neutrality (February 7, 2024).
- Statement on Campus Protests Regarding Events in Israel and Gaza (November 14, 2023).
- AFA Calls for an End to “Divisive Concepts” Legislation (January 9, 2023).
- AFA Calls for an End to Required Diversity Statements (August 22, 2022).
- Guidance Statement on Mandatory Statements (November 5, 2021).

### First Steps to Defend Yourself in a Free Speech Controversy

1. **Don't lose faith in yourself or abandon your convictions.** You have every right to think for yourself and speak your mind. Don't rush to apologize if you have done nothing wrong and have nothing truly to apologize for.
2. **Don't respond to public attacks until you've sought and received good advice.** If you confess to an offense you didn't commit, or if you concede to a claim or accusation that is factually inaccurate or not truly an offense, the admission can and will be used against you.
3. **Get clarity about what you are being accused of doing.** If possible, get access to any formal complaints, including the identity of who is filing them. Figure out the charges and the relevant circumstances behind them. If the institution is unwilling to provide those documents and details, consider refusing to cooperate in any investigation or inquiry. Seek immediate legal help.
4. **Be ready to accept a difficult fact: Your institution may abandon you.** Institutions have their own interests separate from yours.
5. **If the institution wants to meet with you, don't go alone.** Immediately consider bringing a friend, a colleague, or (ideally) a lawyer – someone you can trust completely to stand by you, even when things get difficult.
6. **To survive what could become an extended and emotionally draining fight, you will need a support network willing to stand by you as the pressure mounts.** Frankly evaluate your own network, and identify and prepare your allies for a fight. If necessary, look beyond your familiar associates and build new contacts who can help see you through the controversy.
7. **Learn the relevant campus policies under which you have been charged and what rights you have.** You will need to determine whether there is a credible case against you. Educational institutions have specific rules for academic freedom, harassment, discrimination, and the like. They also have public principles on the institutional mission and the signal significance of intellectual freedom and the pursuit of truth. Take advantage of those rules.
8. **The sooner you seek legal advice, the better positioned you will be for any eventual resolution.** Campus administrators are most often not your allies in these controversies. You need an advocate who has only your interests in mind. Preferably, you will have a lawyer who shares your vision of what you want to accomplish and who understands the higher-education context.
9. **Decide what outcome you hope to reach and how you are willing to get there.** Some professors hope for nothing more than to quietly resolve the dispute on terms they can live with. Others want a full exoneration and, to get it, are willing to engage in a lengthy and public fight. A lawyer can help figure out the options and the probability of success for each.
10. **A final point:** Remember that in standing up for your own rights to think and speak freely, and to seek the truth and speak the truth as best you understand it, you are not only protecting yourself; you are also defending the rights of other scholars (and students) and the integrity of the academic vocation.

**Figure 2:** AFA's advice to academics: First steps to defend yourself in a free speech controversy.

The goal of these documents is to help faculty advance academic freedom at their home institutions by providing well-crafted substantive statements relevant to various aspects of academic freedom.

Here we highlight two statements that are highly relevant to STEM faculty – both related to mandatory Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) statements as a prerequisite for hiring and federal funding. The AFA considers such statements to be compelled speech and, as such, at odds with the mission of the university and existing law.

The statement “AFA Calls for an End to Required Diversity Statements” refers to the practice of universities requiring faculty candidates to provide DEI statements as part of their application package. As the AFA statement explains:

The practice that prompts our concern is requiring that members or prospective members of faculties submit statements in which they are forced to detail ways in

which they have advanced or plan to advance “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI). A school of engineering requires that all applications for faculty positions include “a statement of your experience with or knowledge of inclusion, diversity, equity, and belonging efforts and your plans for incorporating them into your teaching, research, mentoring, and service.” A school of medicine has proposed that faculty members “be required to show effort toward advancing DEI in at least one mission area for which they are evaluated by including a short narrative DEI summary in their personal statement and by listing DEI-related activities on their CVs.” A history department directs applicants to submit a diversity statement that “highlights an understanding of the role of diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in a university setting. Please include examples from past experiences and reference plans to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice in your teaching, research, and service.”

The AFA statement explains why DEI statements are objectionable:

Academics seeking employment or promotion will almost inescapably feel pressured to say things that accommodate the perceived ideological preferences of an institution demanding a diversity statement, notwithstanding the actual beliefs or commitments of those forced to speak. This scenario is inimical to fundamental values that should govern academic life. The demand for diversity statements enlists academics into a political movement, erasing the distinction between academic expertise and ideological conformity. It encourages cynicism and dishonesty. An industry of diversity statement “counselling” has already emerged – and could easily have been predicted. There are prevalent and reasonable suspicions that beneath the stated rationales for diversity statements lurk unstated motives that include providing a way to screen out candidates who express ambivalence about DEI programming.

The growing regime of DEI testing through forced pledges of conformity threatens to impose a suffocating orthodoxy, penalizing expressions of DEI skepticism though such skepticism exists across a wide ideological range that includes not only right-leaning scholars but left-leaning scholars as well. Fortunately, there are signs that increasing numbers of academics are becoming aware of the need to respond with candor and determination to procedures that might seem to be innocuous but that are detrimental to core values of higher education....

It is...our firm conviction that compelled diversity statements undermine the best of the intentions that propel DEI initiatives. It is one thing for schools to take action against wrongful discriminatory conduct; institutions are under a legal as well as moral and pedagogical obligation to do that. A very different and disturbing thing is monitoring beliefs by demanding pledges of allegiance to an array of policies that are often vague, frequently ambiguous, and invariably controversial.

The second statement we highlight, “AFA Calls for an End to Required Diversity Statements in Federal Grant Funding,” pertains to mandatory DEI statements as a prerequisite for federal funding. At the time of the conference, to obtain funding for technical research from the Department of Energy (DOE), National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), or the National

Institutes of Health (NIH), investigators were required to provide as part of their grant application a plan to advance DEI through their research, to implement DEI in their hiring, and to dedicate time and research funds to advance DEI (Efimov et al., 2024).<sup>4</sup>

These requirements were detailed in Efimov et al. (2024), a recent peer-reviewed paper written by a collaboration of AFA members, which documented the extent to which DEI ideology had influenced federal funding agencies and in turn the funding of science. To illustrate how these requirements were implemented, we discuss one example from the paper, namely, NASA.

NASA required grant applications to include a so-called Inclusion Plan. What did NASA expect applicants' inclusion efforts to entail? In NASA's own words, the research team should (Nahm & Watkins, 2023):

- Request time or funded work effort for team members to carry out proposed IP [Inclusion Plan] activities.
- Hire IDEA [Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility] experts as consultants to advise the team on the proposed IP activities (consider paying them well, too!).
- Request funds to support IP activities, such as training for the proposal team.

Continuing, NASA's Nahm & Watkins (2023), explain:

The assessment of the Inclusion Plan will be based on...the extent to which the Inclusion Plan demonstrated awareness of systemic barriers to creating inclusive working environments that are specific to the proposal team.

Opposing these requirements, the AFA's statement on federal funding says:

The Academic Freedom Alliance urges federal agencies that fund research...to desist from demanding that plans to advance DEI...be included in their grant proposals. Widespread requirements for such plans in STEMM grant proposals have been implemented rapidly with far too little attention to their potential misuse, their effects on quality and integrity of funded research, and the threat they represent to academic freedom. We accordingly urge that they be discontinued, for the same reasons that mandatory DEI statements in hiring are being discontinued. Instead, policymakers should shift to alternative approaches to cultivating environments free of bigotry that allow participation of all individuals regardless of their identities (e.g., race, sex, ethnicity, etc.).

The statement further explains why these DEI statements, which amount to political litmus tests, violate academic freedom:

Though the details of DEI requirements vary across agencies and programs, common features include vagueness of their goals and lack of outcome assessments, along with an implicit expectation of allegiance to a politicized litmus test that is, in effect, compelled speech on a controversial issue in violation of academic freedom. To quote a recent editorial opposing mandatory DEI statements in faculty hiring, "By overreaching, by resorting to compulsion, by forcing people to toe a political line,

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<sup>4</sup> As of this writing, these requirements have been targeted for elimination by executive order.



by imposing ideological litmus tests, by incentivizing insincerity, and by creating a circular mode of discourse that is seemingly impervious to self-questioning, the current DEI regime is discrediting itself.”

We believe the AFA’s work will contribute to the ongoing efforts to eliminate mandatory DEI statements from academic hiring and science funding. Some universities have already eliminated them, and, in response to recent executive orders ([The White House, 2025a, 2025b](#)), several funding agencies (e.g., NASA and DOE) have done so as well.

Yet, this recent progress notwithstanding, the AFA’s statements remain important, as the battle continues. Some academics are now claiming that the *elimination* of mandatory DEI statements is an infringement on academic freedom, while some universities are attempting to circumvent the executive orders mandating their elimination. There are also unresolved legal challenges to the anti-DEI executive orders from the National Association of Diversity Officers in Higher Education, the American Association of University Professors, and other groups, who have filed a lawsuit claiming that the executive orders did not define what DEI is ([Mangan, 2025a, 2025b](#)). However, our paper ([Efimov et al., 2024](#)) together with the AFA statements clearly explain what DEI practices the executive orders are targeting.

## Conclusion

Through its impressive list of scholars and attorneys, its early legal successes, and frequent media recognition, the AFA has earned a positive national reputation. When the media covers academic freedom controversies, the AFA is mentioned alongside well-established organizations such as Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) and the Heterodox Academy. With an efficient structure and the work of volunteers, the organization runs on a lean budget. This allows its donations and grants to be put to maximal use in pursuing its mission to defend and educate the public about academic freedom.

To conclude, the AFA illustrates that:

- We have agency and we should use it to defend scholarship from ideology;
- Grassroots organizations can be formed to effectively defend faculty from administrative threats to their academic freedom;
- Unified action is effective, indeed, essential.

We hope that the AFA’s success will inspire other academic communities that are dedicated to the production of knowledge and the pursuit of truth, such as professional organizations and honor societies, to present a unified front against illiberal and censorious ideologies that undermine the truth-seeking mission of institutions of scholarly research and teaching.

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