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Oklahoma U Crushes A Prof's Free Speech

By [David Deming](#)

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I am associate professor of geology and geophysics at the University of Oklahoma in Norman. I receive teaching evaluations that run from average to outstanding. I have more scholarly publications than half the full professors in my department. But as I sit here writing, three of my four classes have been cancelled. I am scheduled to be moved out of the office I have occupied for the last twelve years into a dank hole in the basement that was never intended to be used as office space. Recent events are the culmination of four years of retaliation, intimidation, and harassment. You see, I don't have the right politics. What's worse is that I'm not submissive and I refuse to be bullied and intimidated.

My troubles began in March of 2000 when I published a "letter to the editor" in the campus newspaper that some people found offensive. Responding to a female columnist who claimed that possession of a firearm made every gun owner a potential murderer, I pointed out by way of analogy that her possession of an unregistered sexual organ made her a potential prostitute. For writing this letter, twenty-five charges of sexual harassment were filed against me by people I had never met. My attitudes, convictions, and beliefs were put on trial in a secret Star Chamber proceeding. After I admitted (gasp) that I was a member of the National Rifle Association, I was asked this question: do you think the Nazis were bad people?

For publishing "the letter," I received a formal letter of reprimand from Dean John T. Snow. After receiving the reprimand, I asked Dean Snow how the publication of my controversial letter would affect my position at OU with regard to issues such as promotion and raises. Instead of reassuring me that my expression of a political opinion would not affect my professional career, Snow said that the answer was "unclear." In a statement that I believe was intended to intimidate me, Snow said that in making future decisions he would "weigh in" how much I had learned from past experiences.

I forwarded a copy of Dean Snow's letter of reprimand to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE). Alan Kors, co-founder of FIRE, read Snow's remarks and said he found them to be "alarming." He wrote to Dean Snow:

(Y)our letter and other communications to Professor Deming strike at the heart of his, the universitys, Oklahomas, and this

nations freedom of thought and expression.

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Dean Snow retaliated for the FIRE letter by refusing to forward a routine application I made for funding. If I had received the funding, it would have benefited not just me but Snow's own College.

This was not my first experience with Dean Snow's intolerance. Years earlier, I had attended a College faculty meeting where Snow suggested that the University of Oklahoma should model itself after Pennsylvania State University. I naively pointed out that the expectation was unrealistic, as Pennsylvania was a much wealthier and populous state than Oklahoma. In retort, Snow glared at me and said that what was wrong with the College was attitudes held by "people like you." In other words, anyone who disagreed with John Snow was a problemdissent would not be tolerated in Dean Snow's College.

Other faculty members at the University of Oklahoma have had similar experiences with Dean John T. Snow. A few years ago, the unanimous faculty of the Geology Department sent a letter to Dean Snow that said, "We question your willingness to work with us rather than dictate to us, and your respect for us as a faculty and as individuals." A professor who is now at a different institution said that he left OU because he was told bluntly that if he criticized the administration of Dean Snow's College he would "never get tenure" no matter how good his teaching and research were. When I questioned Snow's commitment to intellectual diversity, a colleague warned me that he expected Snow to "put your severed head on a spike."

In April of 2001, OU President David Boren proclaimed that a policy of "complete free speech" applied to the entire OU campus, but Boren's policy is nothing but empty rhetoric and public relations. Under David Boren's leadership, the degree to which academic freedom and free speech at OU have been suppressed is breathtaking, and perhaps unprecedented at an American university.

The archives for the campus newspaper, *The Oklahoma Daily*, that published my original letter and articles on the resulting controversy, have been deleted from the *Daily's* website. The records for the months covered by the controversy, February, March, and April, of the year 2000 are conspicuous by their absence. Columnist Wendy McElroy wrote that this was one example of "a politically-correct pattern of purging conservative

views from student newspapers [that] seems to be spreading across American campuses." She went on to note that a central theme of George Orwell's classic novel *1984* was the falsifying of history by the Ministry of Truth. People who said or wrote the wrong things were simply purged from the historical archives.

OU vigorously pursued sexual harassment charges against me for writing the aforementioned "letter to the editor." The charges were only dismissed when my attorneys threatened a First Amendment lawsuit. OU agreed not to retaliate against me, but I have never been treated the same since. Now, when I write a "letter to the editor," it is cut out of the newspaper and placed in my personnel file.

On my professional evaluation for 2001, the Chairman of the OU Geology Department, Roger Slatt, marked me down for publishing a letter in the Oklahoma City newspaper that criticized OU's sexual harassment policy. In his words, my rhetoric showed "contempt and resentment" toward the University. I am sure there are numerous instances where a professor has claimed political bias in matters such as promotion, raises, and tenure. But I have never heard of another instance where an administrator openly discussed a professor's politics on his professional evaluation.

On October 15, 2002, several OU faculty published a letter in the campus newspaper that criticized President Bush's policy on Iraq. None of them were punished for doing so. The letter began with the statement that the signers were "dedicated to the idea that the university is one of the last places where free speech and open debate and dissent are possible." I noted with some astonishment that at least one of the signatories was a professor who had filed sexual harassment charges against me for doing the same thing she was now doing expressing a controversial opinion.

That same year, it was shown to me in no uncertain terms what was expected of me. I published a letter in the campus newspaper that complimented President Boren's free speech policy. But my statement was interpreted by Geology Chairman Roger Slatt as a personal compliment for President Boren. He promptly rewarded me with an "outstanding" evaluation for "praising President Boren." I am not aware of any other American university where faculty are rewarded on their professional evaluations for publicly praising the university president. I know this sounds unbelievable, but it was done in writing and I can produce copies.

In the spring of 2003 I went through post-tenure review. My "letters to the editor," written on political subjects totally unrelated to my professional work, were cut out of the newspaper and appended to my dossier by Geology Chairman Roger Slatt. *They are still there.* This unprecedented action was completely analogous to a professor stapling a student's political letters to their examinations. In a subsequent meeting, Dr. Slatt told me that in his opinion it is impossible for a faculty member to speak as an individual. I protested to OU Provost Nancy Mergler. She admitted to me that if I had used a student's political views as the basis for assigning a grade I would have been crucified. But she refused to reprimand Dr. Slatt or even ask him to apologize.

On November 21, 2003, Dean Snow's office circulated by e-mail an article that claimed there were not enough women faculty in the geosciences. The authors argued that women should not have to meet the same standards as men. I responded by circulating on the same email list an editorial I had written that argued against Affirmative Action for women. The gist of my argument was that inequalities in numbers do not necessarily imply inequities. I pointed out that although there may be relatively few women in disciplines like geoscience and engineering, females have advantages in other areas. For example, women live longer than men, receive higher grades in college, and are much less likely than men to end up in prison. Instead of addressing the issues, Geology Chairman Roger Slatt responded to my editorial with a personal attack. Acting with the imprimatur of his administrative authority, Roger Slatt circulated to all faculty, staff, and students in the College of Geoscience a statement that implied because I was against affirmative action I had dysfunctional relationships with women. I protested to Dean John Snow. But Chairman Slatt was not punished I was.

Seven days before Christmas, I was summoned into the office of Dean John T. Snow. My tenure in the geology department was abrogated without due process. My geophysics class for which I receive outstanding student evaluations was taken from me without explanation. I was stripped of my right to supervise graduate students in geology and geophysics. I was evicted from my office and relegated to a small, dark room in a corner of the basement. No other faculty member in the entire College has office space assigned in the basement. Dean Snow glared at me and said that the fundamental problem was that I was not submissive to authority

The administration of the University of Oklahoma seems to want a generation of faculty that are servile, apathetic, and obsequious. No doubt that is what they will get.

After I contacted the media, two of my remaining classes were taken from me. Dean Snow has informed me that he nevertheless expects me to remain fully productive. The situation is not without precedent. The Egyptian Pharaoh punished rebellious Israelite slaves by requiring them to "make bricks without straw."

After taking office several years ago, OU President David Boren announced that the new mission of the University of Oklahoma was to attain "excellence," a goal which heretofore had been more commonly associated with companies that manufacture small kitchen appliances. For hundreds of years, it was universally understood that the mission of our universities was to pass on the core values of Western civilization through liberal education. The most important of these values are freedom of speech and thought; without them no scholarly pursuit or education is possible. My experience indicates that these values are now foreign to the University of Oklahoma.

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