

Open Letter to President Gearan of William and Hobart Smith Colleges,

On April 12, 2024, Dr. Jodi Dean was suspended from her tenured position at Hobart and William Smith (HWS) for a blog post she made at her publisher's website, Verso. The Radical Philosophy Association stands in strong opposition to Smith (HWS) President Mark Gearan's suspension of Professor Jodi Dean and supports her immediate reinstatement.

The Radical Philosophy Association was founded officially in 1982 out of meetings that had been ongoing since 1968. It is an active association with biannual conferences, a journal (Radical Philosophy Review), a magazine, and regular social media presentations.

HWS AAUP President and faculty member Dr. Paul Passavant's response to President Gearan clearly shows how he is violating institutional process, academic norms, and democratic values. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) policy dictates that a faculty member may only be suspended if "immediate harm" is expected. HWS has made no attempt to show how Dean's blog post at her publisher's website could lead to such immediate harm and there is no available evidence that it would do so. The failure since the suspension to demonstrate or explain where HWS had evidence of immediate harm can only force the suspicion that suspension was due to other illegitimate pressures, such as that coming from donors or board members whose personal positions differed from Dr. Dean's.

We also observe that President Gearan's announcement of Professor Dean's suspension reflects nothing of the "dialogue on ideas" he finds so central to the university in his open letter. He presents a shallow and one-sided reading of the blog post by Professor Dean, failing to make any note of context, its arguments, its overall points and only draws its most inflammatory aspects out of that context, free of the background against which they could be rightly understood. Ironically, one of the central arguments of Dean's post is that without reference to the larger historical and political context, an event (in this case the events of October 7) cannot be properly understood. Rather than acting in support of the patient and careful "dialogue on ideas" that he claims to support, President Gearan betrays the ideals of free inquiry and the type of meaningful debate that he claims to support.

It should also be noted that whatever HWS's intentions, this suspension is part of a pattern of action in threatening faculty who speak out against the war in Gaza. Laws have been passed in Texas and elsewhere to intimidate faculty into silence and NPR reports that 81% of faculty surveyed said they felt the need to self-censor when criticizing Israel. HWS's actions contribute a pattern of erosion of faculty freedom to pursue the truth and evaluate different points of view that go well beyond Dean's case—intentional or no. Dean's suspension needs to be evaluated against its own injustice and against the costs that it will entail well beyond this specific case. One small example confined just to ramifications within HWS: Would HWS faculty who now assign her piece as part of a discussion be suspended? What about those who quote from it? Who use it in an article they write? Would they all pose the same immediate threat that Dean did? In knuckling under to the McCarthyism of the present, HWS is not just staking a position on Dean's case but on academic freedom on their campus that will have significant negative knock-on effects.

The Radical Philosophy Association stands in support of the reinstatement of Prof. Dean and condemns President Gearan's improper suspension of a valued colleague and leading voice in political theory.

Sincerely,
RPA Board of Directors
May 5, 2024