

October 29, 2021

Dear President Fuchs,

UFF is alarmed to hear that the University of Florida has infringed upon the academic freedom and First Amendment rights of three political science professors—Drs. Sharon Austin, Dan Smith, and Michael McDonald—by denying their requests to participate as expert witnesses in a voting rights lawsuit against the State of Florida. Equally disturbing is the university’s rationale behind these denials: that “litigation against the state is adverse to UF’s interests,” and, shockingly, that “outside activities that may pose a conflict of interest to the executive branch of the State of Florida create a conflict for the University of Florida.” These assertions that the interests and mission of the university are somehow equivalent with those of the current executive branch of the State of Florida are indefensible. They undermine the university’s adherence to principles of academic freedom and the constitutional rights of UF’s faculty, staff, and students.

The University of Florida is not coextensive with the state’s executive branch. As a public institution of higher education, the university has an obligation, to quote its mission statement, “to share the benefits of its research and knowledge for the public good.” There is no greater service the university can provide to the public than for its faculty to serve as expert witnesses in cases that ensure voting rights are upheld according to the constitutional rights of its citizens.

All citizens of the United States, including higher education faculty, have the fundamental right to address grievances against their government, especially when that government is acting in ways that undermine the rights, privileges, and freedoms of those citizens. The United Faculty of Florida insists that these faculty have the right—even the duty—to participate in litigation in their field of expertise regardless of their means or location of employment. The idea that the University of Florida would attempt to limit this right and duty for reasons that are antithetical to the fundamental principles of American democracy is political coercion of the grossest magnitude. UF’s world class faculty have historically served as expert witnesses for both Democrats and Republicans, both for and against the executive branch. Changing that policy now by weaponizing outside activity reporting forms to support a political agenda does nothing to support the public good, and it serves only to diminish the university’s standing among the local community and nationally.

We write now on behalf of the 25,000 higher education professionals we represent to ask that you rescind this dangerous decision and provide all faculty at the University of Florida the opportunity to exercise their academic freedom as scholars and their constitutional rights as citizens. Otherwise, the United Faculty of Florida will undertake all necessary legal, contractual, and legislative measures to ensure that the fundamental principles of American freedom and democracy are protected at the University of Florida, now and into the future.

Sincerely,



Andrew Gothard

UFF President



Candi Churchill

UFF Executive Director