

NEWS RELEASE**October 30, 2021****Contacts:** Andrew Gothard, UFF President
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United Faculty of Florida Stands Up for UF Professors & All Floridians' First Amendment Rights

The University of Florida (UF) 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. We stand with our members and their duty to share their expertise for the public good. We stand with all Floridians and their right to criticize their government. If UF does not rescind its decision, it will establish a terrifying precedent for any Floridian who works in local or state government.

On behalf of the 25,000 higher education professionals UFF represents, we call on UF to get out of the way and allow faculty to tell the truth based on their expertise and research. UFF will defend our members if the university takes any disciplinary action against them, either for continuing to participate in the voting rights lawsuit or for going public about the university's unconstitutional decision.

"The University of Florida has overstepped its authority by denying these professors the right to participate as expert witnesses in a voting rights case against the state. It is absolutely shameful that the University of Florida has chosen this partisan approach to public service in an attempt to sway the outcome of a lawsuit. The United Faculty of Florida will do all that is within our power to protect the First Amendment rights of higher education faculty, students, and staff across the state. A university's interests are not synonymous with those of the state, since the advancement of knowledge for the public good must be above political parties."

-UFF President Andrew Gothard

"For me, this is about my role as an African American female mentor. A Southern Black woman who is not fighting for voting rights is a sell-out to her community. I refuse to teach my students that it is important to fight for voting and civil rights and then not fight for those rights myself.

My father was born in 1938 and my mother in 1940 in Robinsonville, Mississippi. They couldn't even think about voting for many years and lived in poverty as sharecroppers until they moved to the city of Memphis as young adults. They would be outraged if they knew that their daughter has a Ph.D., is a tenured professor, is among only 2% of black female full professors in the nation, but is now refusing to fight to protect voting rights. If Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer could lose their jobs, then I could lose mine too, but not without a fight.

UF should defend the rights of three of its most committed and award-winning faculty members and not cave into pressure from outside statewide forces."

-Sharon Austin, UF Political Science Professor

"It's really quite breathtaking, and a complete reversal from the green light that the UF administration has always given me to promote the voting rights of all Floridians. We will not back down from this attack on our First Amendment rights to speak out on our own time, on matters of great public importance."

-Daniel Smith, Professor and Chair of UF's Political Science department

Enclosed is a letter UFF sent to UF President Fuchs Friday Oct 29, 2021.

Sent via email to president@ufl.edu and general-counsel@ufl.edu on 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