

2024-2025 Year-End Committee Report

Committee:	Faculty Rights and Responsibilities
Charge:	attends to policies regarding academic freedom, teaching, research, interpersonal conduct, terms of appointment, promotion and tenure, and related matters, particularly with regard to the Faculty Handbook.
Chair:	Mark Alznauer
# of Meetings:	Four (three on zoom, one in person)

Completed Business and/or Accomplishments

Throughout the year, we discussed possible faculty rights issues raised by the University's handling of Steven Thrasher (Medill). On July 8th, Professor Thrasher was sent a letter from Charles Whitaker, the Dean of Medill, which questioned whether he was capable of responsibly discharging his duties as a teacher on the basis of certain accusations by students and other members of the community. Whitaker found these accusations serious enough to instigate an investigation and he said that while the process was pending, Prof. Thrasher would be prohibited from teaching any courses at Northwestern. In the Senate, some faculty had raised concerns about the opening of disciplinary proceedings against Thrasher which (in their view) was potentially related to extramural speech (his advocacy of the Palestinian cause during the Deering Meadow protests in the Spring of 2024). Although this raises many issues, the Committee focused on the removal of his teaching responsibilities (without any possibility of appeal), as this seemed contravene the disciplinary procedures identified in the Faculty Handbook.

On November 13th, the Committee put forward a proposal to the Faculty Senate which sought clarification from the administration about how it understood the limits (if any) of its prerogative to remove faculty from teaching obligations. The motion to approve the proposal failed to garner a majority (24 voted in favor, 24 against). The proposal was then voted back to the Committee.

The Committee continued to consider modifications to the initial proposal—particularly with an eye toward the possible institution of some kind of mechanism by which these sorts of decisions could be appealed—but events continued to take their course. In January, the University found that the allegations against Thrasher did not warrant a suspension or any other disciplinary action but a new investigation was instigated on other grounds. In March, Thrasher was denied tenure and then in response to what the Administration regarded as mischaracterizations of the tenure process, he was permanently removed from teaching. It is clear that the Administration regards removing someone from teaching as entirely within its rights as an employer and as a right it cannot give up without

jeopardizing the interests of other members of the University community. It is equally clear that many faculty see these actions as contrary to procedures identified for suspension in the Faculty Handbook. We were not able to resolve the conflict.

Later in the year, we also discussed concerns raised by a letter from the House of Representatives dated March 27th that made a series of demands of the University, including demands for hiring materials and performance reviews of a faculty member at the law school's Bluhm Legal Clinic. The faculty rights issues raised by this letter became less pressing when the House committee withdrew its request on April 10th, in response to a lawsuit filed by several professors in the law school.

Unfinished/Continuing Business

It is still not clear how to reconcile the Northwestern University Faculty Handbook's claim that school deans, department chairs, and program directors have the prerogative to assign teaching responsibilities and courses to each faculty member with the Handbook's prohibition of any suspension (or assignment of other duties in lieu of suspension) of a faculty member *except* as the outcome of disciplinary procedures identified in the handbook which bring with them rights of appeal. This difficult issue has been a problem in the past (with the David Protess case in 2011) and is likely to emerge again in the future.

New Business for Next Year

No new business is scheduled.