The AFCON Sentinel

Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

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Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

Statement on Academic Governance

Adopted July 11, 2026

In spring 2026, three issues raised questions of academic freedom and academic governance in Nebraska:

(1) The University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) removed an optional online professional development module intended to help faculty create a welcoming environment for transgender students after it was condemned by the governor and others.

(2) UNK dropped a human sexuality textbook it had used for ten years after a student complained it was "pornographic."

(3) The governor issued an executive order requiring all public educational institutions to use a specific definition of antisemitism, after the legislature failed to pass a bill requiring that.

These issues raise general questions about academic governance: Who should be making decisions about matters such as these? The governor? The legislature? Governing boards? Administrators? Faculty? Students?

To serve its academic purposes, academic governance must be rooted in respect for academic freedom, which includes freedoms of teaching, learning, and inquiry. Students have a right to an academically defensible curriculum presented in a manner that promotes learning, understanding, and critical thinking. Correspondingly, faculty—both individually and collectively—are responsible for providing a curriculum rooted in professional expertise and teaching it in a manner that promotes learning, understanding, and critical thinking in students. The academic freedom of teachers consists of the freedom to teach in accord with their best academic and professional judgment. The academic freedom of students consists of the freedom to learn and inquire. Academic freedom for both teachers and students includes freedom of inquiry related to their roles. Educational institutions themselves, moreover, require institutional academic freedom—the autonomy to act in accord with their academic goals and values, which includes maintaining a system of academic freedom in teaching, learning, and inquiry.

Academic governance, properly exercised, involves governing boards, administrators, and faculty, exercising both distinctive and shared responsibilities. Administrators are expected to create, maintain, and enforce conditions of respect for the academic freedom of faculty and students, and to defend the institution against improper intrusions from governing boards and external authorities. Governing boards should set policies supporting and promoting academic freedom. They should avoid micromanagement, especially regarding academic matters, where faculty expertise is central. Governing boards should also defend the institution's autonomy, including the academic freedom of faculty and students, against external authorities. Legislatures and

governors, wielding enormous power to influence education throughout the state through fiscal and other decisions, should carefully respect the authority of governing boards, the autonomy of educational institutions, and the academic freedom of faculty and students.

In the case of the professional development module, UNK chose to offer a voluntary professional development opportunity for its faculty. The purpose of the module is to help faculty better understand some of their students and thus be better teachers. There is no reason for the governor to be involved in this. By giving in to external political pressure, UNK compromises its institutional autonomy and potentially invites further external pressures.

In the case of the human sexuality text, the book in question is a standard textbook, now in its sixth edition, that has been used at UNK for ten years. The UNK administration acknowledged that the use of the book in a Family Science course on human sexuality was academically justifiable and did not violate any law. Nevertheless, it concluded that the book should be discontinued because it "does contain graphic images," despite the fact that the sort of images it provides are standard in such texts and serve important educational purposes. The discontinuation of the book infringed on the academic freedom of faculty with regard to curriculum and instruction and on the academic freedom of students to access and learn from texts selected on academic grounds by faculty.

Finally, it is not the role of the governor (or the legislature) to define antisemitism for educational institutions. The particular definition he chose, moreover, is notorious for conflating criticism of Israel with antisemitism and thus undermining expression, discussion, teaching, learning, and inquiry about Israel and related matters. The political motivation was made especially clear when the governor, announcing his executive order, made the false and appalling claim that Palestinians are "born to kill Jews."

For more about the three cases (and many others), see the Academic Freedom Nebraska Case Repository.

Shortly after this statement was approved, it was sent to members of and candidates for the Unicam with this cover letter:

AFCON Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska
https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/

July 15, 2026

To Members of and Candidates for the Nebraska Legislature:

The freedom to teach, study and learn is fundamental to American society. From it spring scientific discoveries, inventions, artistic creations and insights that make our country more

prosperous and more enjoyable. The attached statement from the board of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska discusses three recent infringements of academic freedom. AFCON comprises organizations and individuals who promote academic freedom.

We have three reasons for issuing this statement:

First, we want the elected political leaders of the state to understand the value of academic freedom. Key constituents—among them students and their parents—deserve to know their elected leaders will protect the intellectual vibrancy of the state's educational institutions.

Second, we want the students, teachers and institutions whose academic freedom has been infringed to know they are not alone. There are many individuals and organizations who support and protect academic freedom. AFCON is one, but there are many others. We encourage any who encounter efforts to limit their academic freedom to seek support.

Third, we urge the governing boards of all academic institutions in Nebraska, public and private, to actively resist efforts to limit what teachers may teach and what students may learn. Colleges, universities and schools transmit knowledge and cultural heritage from one generation to another, conduct research leading to the generation of new knowledge, and encourage critical thinking. None of these tasks can be performed without broad academic freedom.

For more information about AFCON, you can go to our website or you can email me at jrbender3609@yahoo.com.

Sincerely,
John R. Bender
2026 President of AFCON

Hold The Date!
Saturday, September 19
9am to Noon
St. Matthews Episcopal Church
2325 S. 24th Street, Lincoln

AFCON and the Nebraska AAUP are co-sponsoring a meeting to engage candidates for elected office in conversation about academic freedom, academic governance, and related issues. The meeting will be free and open to anyone interested, with advance registration requested to help plan for refreshments. Additional information will be forthcoming. If you have questions or want to register now, email Regina Werum at rwerum2@unl.edu.

For more about AFCON, see our website:

https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org

Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska
Board of Directors Meeting
Via Videoconference

June 13, 2026

Present:
Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison
John Bartle, representing UNO Faculty Senate
John Bender, president, representing UNL Faculty Senate
Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Reading Association
Bob Haller, director at large
Laurie Thomas Lee, president-elect, representing American Civil Liberties Union, Nebraska
Dave Moshman, policy coordinator
Rod Wagner, treasurer, representing Nebraska Center for the Book
Vicki Wood, editor-in-chief, director at large

MINUTES

President John Bender called the meeting to order at 10:03 a.m.

MINUTES: A motion was made by Moshman, second by Adair, to approve corrected minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on April 11, 2026. Motion carried by a voice vote and show of hands. Thank you to Vicki Wood for preparing the April minutes.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Wagner reported balance on hand as of June 12, 2026, is $4,463.67.

UNO FAULTY SENATE: Bender introduced John Bartle and welcomed him to the AFCON board. Bartle represents the UNO Faculty Senate and is chair of the UNO Faculty Development Committee.

BOARD OF REGENTS: Bender reported the board will meet in June 18 and will consider a substantial raise in tuition rates.

POLICY COORDINATOR: Moshman reported on a series of academic freedom issues at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, including the administration's censoring of a textbook that has been used for 10 years in a UNK human sexuality class.
Moshman also reported on Governor Pillen's recent executive order requiring all Nebraska schools to adhere to the IHRA definition of antisemitism, and on Pillen's public statement that Palestinians are "born to kill Jews and Christians."
Moshman will work with Bender to draft official AFCON statements concerning these policy issues.

SENTINEL: The deadline for articles for the next issue of the Sentinel is July 24, 2026. Moshman volunteered to edit the August issue of the Sentinel to assist the editor-in-chief who will be off grid in an undisclosed location.

ANNUAL MEETING: The board agreed by consensus to hold the AFCON annual meeting on a separate date from the upcoming AAUP-AFCON co-sponsored meeting on September 19, 2026. Wood and Comer will work with Regina Werum to develop specific K-12 academic freedom-related questions for candidates coming to the AAUP-AFCON meeting.

The AFCON annual meeting will focus on student journalism. Suggested dates for the AFCON annual meeting are October 17, October 24, November 7, or November 14. The board will further discuss and plan the AFCON annual meeting at the July board meeting.

ORGANIZATIONAL REPORTS:
Nebraska School Librarians Association – Bulgrin reported via email the Nebraska School Librarian Day will be October 17 in Omaha and Kearney.

Nebraska Library Association – Wood reported the NLA Advocacy Group is meeting monthly while the Nebraska Legislature is not in session.

UNO Faculty Senate – Bartle reported the UNO administration abruptly closed the UNO child care center leaving faculty, students and children in the lurch. Bartle reported UNO budget development has been largely opaque.

NEXT MEETING: The next AFCON board meeting will be Saturday, July 11, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. via Zoom.

There being no further business, the AFCON board meeting adjourned at 11:03 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Peggy Adair

Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska
Board of Directors Meeting
Via Videoconference

July 11, 2026

Present:
Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison
John Bartle, representing UNO Faculty Senate
John Bender, president, representing UNL Faculty Senate
Bob Haller, director at large
Laurie Thomas Lee, president-elect, representing American Civil Liberties Union, Nebraska
Dave Moshman, policy coordinator
Lila Padios, representing The Write Stuff
Rod Wagner, treasurer, representing Nebraska Center for the Book
Regina Werum, representing American Association of University Professors, UNL
Vicki Wood, editor-in-chief, director at large

MINUTES

President John Bender called the meeting to order at 10:01 a.m.

MINUTES: A motion was made by Moshman, second by Wagner, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on June 13, 2026. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Wagner reported balance on hand as of July 11, 2026, is $4,463.67.

BOARD OF REGENTS: Bender reported the board met on June 18 and voted to raise student tuition rates.

POLICY COORDINATOR: Moshman presented the final draft statement on academic governance to the board via email. A motion was made by Werum, second by Adair, to approve the final draft statement. Motion carried on a voice vote. Bender will distribute the AFCON statement on academic governance to faculty senate presidents, the NSEA, AAUP, other stakeholders, and media outlets.

SENTINEL: Moshman will edit the August issue of the Sentinel. Deadline for articles is July 26, 2026.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AWARD: A motion was made by Moshman, second by Lee, to present the 2026 Academic Freedom Award to the Gretna East High School student whose political cartoon was censored from the student newspaper by prior restraint; and to the student activist who publicly advocated for the cartoonist. Motion carried on a voice vote.

ANNUAL MEETING: The 2026 AFCON annual meeting will be a joint meeting with The Write Stuff and will focus on high school student rights. A motion was made by Moshman, second by Adair to authorize Bender and Padios to work together to set a date and parameters for the joint annual meeting. Motion carried on a voice vote.

ORGANIZATIONAL REPORTS:
Nebraska Library Association – Wood reported the NLA Advocacy Group is working on an upcoming joint conference with the Mountain Plains Library Association.

NEXT MEETING: The next AFCON board meeting will be Saturday, September 12, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. via Zoom.

There being no further business, the AFCON board meeting adjourned at 10:55 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Peggy Adair

Website: https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org