

# The AFCON Sentinel

Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

Volume 26, Number 1

February 2022

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## From the President

Bob Haller

First, let me say that I am humbled to become president of AFCON once again. It leads me to recall my first election to this office some 34 years ago.

That memory reminds me that over the past year I considered resigning as president-elect rather than continuing on to become president for the fourth time because the effects of age on my memory have been insidious. I decided to give it a try anyway. I am depending on officers and Board members to keep me on track. But I may reconsider. And in the meantime nudge me when necessary.

I have also noted that age means that I am farther away from my days as a UNL English professor and even farther from being a student or the parent of students. I facilitated a course in *Free Speech* in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute last fall (thank you John Bender, Dave Moshman, and Vicki Wood for presenting) and will be also facilitating a course on Dante's *Comedia* for Stephen Lahey, a former UNL Colleague in the Classics and Religion Department.

But OLLI does not need AFCON. Its "students" and "teachers" would hold in contempt anybody

who tried to compromise intellectual freedom in its offerings or policies. I know I can call on OLLI members to support the cause of Academic Freedom. I take some inspiration from Dante himself, who stressed to Cangrande della Scala how he appreciated his friends in power who supported his freedom as a poet. And I was pleased last year to receive royalties for my own book on Dante's literary criticism, published in 1974—meaning someone bought it recently and I hope was glad they did.

My reason for making an attempt to lead AFCON is my present focus on trying to understand education as a human right. This led to my three-part series on the right to education in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the February, April, and June 2021 issues of the *AFCON Sentinel*.

The right to education means, above all, that governance of public education and public libraries must be effectively vested in independent governing boards such as boards of education, boards of regents, or library boards. The autonomy of these institutions rules out mandates by the Legislature or the Governor or any other officers of the state. It also rules out violating academic procedures and policies to appease those who want ideas or books removed from the curriculum or library.

AFCON needs to support the constitutional structures already in place to guide policy-making in our public education. It must stress the degree to which our educational systems are effective because of their autonomy and freedom.

I am sure there will be other issues, but I know we can face them as they appear.



## **Dirty Knowledge**

Julia Schleck

January 2022 saw the publication of a new book on academic freedom, published by the University of Nebraska Press in their *Provocations* series. [\*Dirty Knowledge: Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism\*](#) explores the failure of traditional conceptions of academic freedom in the age of neoliberalism. In it, I examine and reject the increasing tendency to view academic freedom as a form of free speech, and highlight the problem of basing academic freedom upon employment protections like tenure at a time when they are being actively eliminated through neoliberalism's preference for gig labor.

The argument traditionally made for such protections is that they help produce knowledge "for the public good," through the protected isolation of the Ivory Tower, where "pure" knowledge is sought and disseminated. In contrast, *Dirty Knowledge* insists that academic knowledge production is and has always been "dirty," deeply involved in the debates of its time and increasingly permeated by outside interests whose financial and material support provides some research programs with significant advantages over others. I argue for a new vision of the university's role in society as one of our most important forums for contending views of

what exactly constitutes "the good" in our society, warning that the intellectual monoculture encouraged by neoliberalism poses a serious danger to our collective futures and insisting on deliberate, material support for faculty research and teaching that runs counter to neoliberal values.

The book opens with the story of the controversy that played out on the University of Nebraska Lincoln campus in 2017-2018, detailing events that were ultimately cast as a major skirmish in the new culture war over free speech on college campuses across the United States. It provides an overview of the case, and the resulting censure of the university by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), for violating the academic freedom of one of the participants, PhD student Courtney Lawton. Although the episode was widely cast as a battle over free speech, I argue that the case should instead be viewed through the lens of academic freedom and its slow demise in the age of the neoliberalism.

To trace this demise, the first chapter addresses the origins of academic freedom in the United States during the Progressive Era. It explores how reformers formulated a concept of academic freedom perfectly calibrated to protect faculty labor in the disciplinary regime of Progressive Era capitalism. Control of knowledge production was passed from political and economic elites to a cadre of professionals rapidly organizing into self-regulated disciplines and eventually protected by tenure. These special employment privileges were justified through the belief that the knowledge produced by academic workers benefitted the whole of society. This set of ideas and practices surrounding university faculty labor is known as academic freedom, supported by the idea that their work served the public good.

The second chapter surveys the changes to institutions of higher education under the economic regime of neoliberalism in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In it,

I examine the way “academic capitalism” subjects all academic activities to the market and its values, and consider the implications of these developments for traditional conceptions of academic freedom. In particular, I contend that neoliberalism’s preference for “flexible” hiring practices, resulting in three-quarters of the faculty working off the tenure track, spells the death of academic freedom as it was originally designed.

In my third chapter, I consider an alternative idea of academic freedom currently spreading through higher education, one that facilitates rather than impedes the gig labor hiring practices of the neoliberal university. Academic capitalism champions an academic freedom that is functionally equivalent to free speech as protected under United States law, wherein individual professors are protected through reference to university bylaws that assert their rights to research and teach without censorship. In this way, professors are protected by virtue of their status as faculty working under university bylaws, but not by the terms of their employment contract. I critique this individualized freedom as inadequate and contrast it to the collective rights accorded to the self-governing body of professionals established by traditional conceptions of academic freedom.

In my final chapter, I propose a new definition of academic freedom, one designed for the neoliberal age. The chapter opens with a supportive discussion of academic unionization, then critiques the rhetoric of the public good, showing how it is grounded in fictions that are no longer accepted as true by much of the public. I propose a reconceptualization of the university’s function in society, not as an Ivory Tower producing neutral knowledge, but as a profoundly politicized space generating “dirty knowledge” through which debates over what constitutes “the good”—including the “public good”—are played out. I insist upon a recognition of the role played by the financial support provided by outside agents in the outcome of such debates and makes a case for

supporting research that goes against the grain of neoliberalism or falls outside its dictates. The chapter concludes with a warning of the danger the intellectual monoculture we are increasingly cultivating poses to future generations, insisting that the university serves as an intellectual seed bank against future disasters and upon the need to maintain the widest possible diversity of ideas. In summary, the new academic freedom should combine an intellectual freedom from the myth of disinterested purity with the material freedom to generate the greatest possible range of human knowledge in the academy, now and into the future.

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*Julia Schleck is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska Lincoln. She is a past president of the AAUP Nebraska State Conference and the UNL Chapter of AAUP, and a member of the national AAUP’s Committee on College and University Governance.*

**See page 4 for more on this book, including a 40% discount on this title or any other from University of Nebraska Press.**



***AFCON***

[www.academicfreedomnebraska.org](http://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org)

The Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska was founded in 1988 to promote intellectual freedom in Nebraska education and research, including freedoms of belief and expression and access to information and ideas.

## DIRTY KNOWLEDGE

### Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism

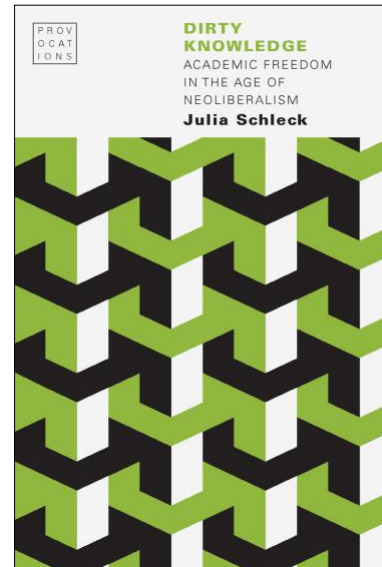
JULIA SCHLECK

"In *Dirty Knowledge* Julia Schleck shows how the conflation of academic freedom with freedom of speech erodes the academic nature of academic freedom and serves the atomizing purposes of neoliberalism; she also shows how the casualization of the academic workforce undermines academic freedom altogether. This is one of the very few books on academic freedom that ties the concept to the economic conditions of the profession—and one of the very few books on neoliberalism in the university that treats 'neoliberalism' as a coherent body of belief rather than as an all-purpose epithet. Required reading for anyone interested in the future of academic freedom and the future of the academy."—Michael Bérubé, Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of Literature at Pennsylvania State University

*Dirty Knowledge* explores the failure of traditional conceptions of academic freedom in the age of neoliberalism. While examining and rejecting the increasing tendency to view academic freedom as a form of free speech, Julia Schleck highlights the problem of basing academic freedom on employment protections like tenure at a time when such protections are being actively eliminated through neoliberalism's preference for gig labor. The argument traditionally made for such protections is that they help produce knowledge "for the public good" through the protected isolation of the Ivory Tower, where "pure" knowledge is sought and disseminated.

In contrast, *Dirty Knowledge* insists that academic knowledge production is and has always been "dirty," deeply involved in the debates of its time and increasingly permeated by outside interests whose financial and material support provides some research programs with significant advantages over others. Schleck argues for a new vision of the university's role in society as one of the most important forums for contending views of what exactly constitutes a societal "good," warning that the intellectual monoculture encouraged by neoliberalism poses a serious danger to our collective futures and insisting on deliberate, material support for faculty research and teaching that runs counter to neoliberal values.

Julia Schleck is an associate professor of English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. She is the author of *Telling True Tales of Islamic Lands: Forms of Mediation in English Travel Writing, 1575–1630*.



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## **National Coalition Against Censorship**

### **Statement on Schoolbook Censorship**

December 2021

*endorsed by the AFCON Board, Dec. 11, 2021*

In communities across the country, an organized political attack on books in schools threatens the education of America's children. These ongoing attempts to purge schools of books represent a partisan political battle fought in school board meetings and state legislatures. The undersigned organizations and individuals are deeply concerned about this sudden rise in censorship and its impact on education, the rights of students, and freedom of expression.

Nearly all communities have developed policies for both handling book challenges and allowing parents to influence their own child's reading, but they must do so within the guideposts set forth by the Supreme Court, without infringing on the rights of other students. The law clearly prohibits the kind of activities we are seeing today: censoring school libraries, removing books—and entire reading lists—based on disagreement with viewpoint and without any review of their educational or literary merit. Some would-be censors have gone even farther, threatening teachers, school librarians, authors, and school board members with criminal charges and even violence for allowing students access to books.

Libraries offer students the opportunity to encounter books and other material that they might otherwise never see and the freedom to make their own choices about what to read. Denying young people this freedom to explore—often on the basis of a single controversial passage cited out of context—will limit not only what they can learn but who they can become.

Books help students connect with characters whose stories reflect their own lives. They also widen their view of a changing world that embraces diversity and multiculturalism. But there is always resistance to change. So it is not surprising that most of the books that are being attacked address concerns of groups previously underrepresented in libraries and school curriculums: books about lived experiences of racism or of growing up LGBTQIA and

experiencing bias, discrimination, hate and even violence.

The First Amendment guarantees that no individual, group of individuals, legislator, community member, or even school board member can dictate what public school students are allowed to read based on their own personal beliefs or political viewpoint.

It is freedom of expression that ensures that we can meet the challenges of a changing world. That freedom is critical for the students who will lead America in the years ahead. We must fight to defend it.

<https://ncac.org/news/attack-on-books>

### **Letter to University of Nebraska President Carter**

Dwayne Ball and David Moshman

December 17, 2021

Ted Carter, President  
University of Nebraska  
[president@nebraska.edu](mailto:president@nebraska.edu)

Dear President Carter,

We are two emeritus faculty at UNL who differ on matters of politics and ideology, including matters related to diversity and inclusion, but have worked together for many years in support of academic freedom and civil liberties. Although we have differing reactions to UNL's new diversity plan and the subsequent critiques of it, we were both very pleased with this paragraph from your response:

“Here's what we will not do. We will not impose critical race theory, nor any theory, upon students. We will not hire candidates based on their skin color. We will not close our doors to any qualified student. We will not limit the free, robust exchange of ideas on campus – one of the most cherished ideals in higher learning.”

We are concerned, however, about a passage in University of Nebraska Executive Memorandum Number 34 that seems inconsistent with the final sentence of that paragraph. In reference to administrative, faculty, and staff searches, EM 34 specifies: “Plans should ... ensure that selected candidates can articulate a commitment to diversity and inclusion.”

This sounds to us like a loyalty oath. Anyone who wants a job at the University of Nebraska must pledge their allegiance to diversity and inclusion. As a practical matter, this means that applicants must do their best to determine what the search committee wants to hear about diversity and inclusion so they can say the right things. This undermines what you described as “the free, robust exchange of ideas on campus – one of the most cherished ideals in higher learning.”

Universities must ensure their employees do not engage in unlawful discriminatory conduct and may adopt legal policies concerning matters of diversity and inclusion. Neither employees nor applicants, however, may be required to profess their commitment to diversity policies or to officially favored concepts or values.

We respectfully suggest the University revise or remove the requirement we quoted and any other requirement that anyone at, or hoping to be at, the University must state their commitment (or opposition) to particular viewpoints or ideas in order to be hired, serve on search committees, or serve in the administration.

Sincerely,  
A. Dwayne Ball  
David Moshman

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*Dwayne Ball and David Moshman are both former presidents of AFCON and worked together for many years on the ACLU Nebraska Board of Directors, but this letter was written in their personal capacities as emeritus UNL faculty. There has been no response.*

## Nebraska Links

OWH and LJS editorials oppose calls for a state constitutional amendment to eliminate the state Board of Education and place K-12 public education under direct control of the governor

[https://omaha.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-nebraskans-should-reject-radical-overhaul-of-state-education-board-department/article\\_1ae534a4-4d6e-11ec-9c56-8fe305e55fc6.html](https://omaha.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-nebraskans-should-reject-radical-overhaul-of-state-education-board-department/article_1ae534a4-4d6e-11ec-9c56-8fe305e55fc6.html)

[https://journalstar.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-12-5-state-board-of-education-must-remain-independent/article\\_d01d2ac2-e538-58a3-8529-091d4b1e8cde.html](https://journalstar.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-12-5-state-board-of-education-must-remain-independent/article_d01d2ac2-e538-58a3-8529-091d4b1e8cde.html)

Unicam considers legislation to limit discretion of state board of education

[https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/bill-would-prevent-nebraskas-education-board-from-adopting-health-education-standards/article\\_dd2a81d6-6dc6-11ec-be54-dbe5a251b57f.html](https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/bill-would-prevent-nebraskas-education-board-from-adopting-health-education-standards/article_dd2a81d6-6dc6-11ec-be54-dbe5a251b57f.html)

New member appointed to state Board of Education opposes proposed health education standards

[https://omaha.com/news/local/education/in-first-meeting-kirk-penner-tries-to-kill-proposed-nebraska-health-education-standards/article\\_d9cba5a2-6fc8-11ec-9be4-a3e9c5e9cb06.html](https://omaha.com/news/local/education/in-first-meeting-kirk-penner-tries-to-kill-proposed-nebraska-health-education-standards/article_d9cba5a2-6fc8-11ec-9be4-a3e9c5e9cb06.html)

Nebraska Unicam January 2022

[https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/bill-would-restrict-how-nebraska-schools-government-treat-race-and-sex/article\\_d0bee4fe-7894-11ec-9b51-a71b3bf5e0e1.html](https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/bill-would-restrict-how-nebraska-schools-government-treat-race-and-sex/article_d0bee4fe-7894-11ec-9b51-a71b3bf5e0e1.html)

Continuing furor over new UNL diversity plan as two state senators call for UNL Chancellor Green to resign

[https://norfolkdailynews.com/commentary/letters\\_to\\_editor/resignation-requested-sens-steve-erdman-and-steve-halloran/article\\_526564de-51e8-11ec-bb4e-ffa6792f162c.html](https://norfolkdailynews.com/commentary/letters_to_editor/resignation-requested-sens-steve-erdman-and-steve-halloran/article_526564de-51e8-11ec-bb4e-ffa6792f162c.html)

National coverage of the call for Green’s resignation  
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/12/01/nebraska-lawmakers-call-resignation-unl-chancellor>

Chancellor Green’s response

[https://journalstar.com/news/local/education/unl-chancellor-green-responds-to-attacks-by-ricketts-against-universitys-diversity-plan/article\\_3918a03a-17ec-57f8-9eaf-45f9dca5cd9.html](https://journalstar.com/news/local/education/unl-chancellor-green-responds-to-attacks-by-ricketts-against-universitys-diversity-plan/article_3918a03a-17ec-57f8-9eaf-45f9dca5cd9.html)

Regents meeting Dec. 2021

[https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/no-vocal-opposition-at-meeting-but-3-regents-criticize-unl-racial-equity-plan-afterward/article\\_3496ebee-5201-11ec-ae48-1f6b8b0059c9.html](https://omaha.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/no-vocal-opposition-at-meeting-but-3-regents-criticize-unl-racial-equity-plan-afterward/article_3496ebee-5201-11ec-ae48-1f6b8b0059c9.html)

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**Thursday, February 24th**  
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# FREEDOM TO READ ROUNDTABLE

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**FEATURING:**

<p><b>George Matthew Johnson</b> bestselling author of <i>All Boys Aren't Blue</i></p>	<p><b>Erica Sanchez</b> dual language educator, community advocate, and mother</p>	<p><b>Mary Woodard</b> Texas Library Association president-elect</p>	<p><b>Jeneta N.</b> high school junior</p>
<p><b>Ryan S.</b> high school sophomore</p>	<p><b>The Honorable Erin Zwiener</b> Legislator, Texas House of Representatives</p>	<p>Moderated by: <b>Brian Lopez</b> <i>The Texas Tribune</i></p>	

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A new report on campus free expression recommends:

- “First, colleges and universities must address the perceived tension that pits academic freedom and freedom of expression against diversity, equity, and inclusion in creating a respectful learning environment for all. While not ignoring that there may be expression that is hurtful, we believe profoundly that free expression is an essential means to an inclusive campus in addition to being essential to higher education’s academic and civic missions.
- “Second, colleges and universities should take steps to encourage more viewpoint diversity on campus. Exposing students to a wide range of perspectives and methods of confronting issues is essential for both a well-rounded education and as preparation for the rigors of citizenship in a diverse society.
- “Third, colleges and universities should adopt strong policies for the protection of free expression for students and faculty, to forestall hasty or ad hoc responses to controversial expression, and to defend the expression of unorthodox and controversial views.
- “Fourth, colleges and universities should elevate the skills and dispositions necessary to academic and civic discourse as a deliberate aim of the collegiate experience. Formal protections for free expression are necessary but insufficient to create a culture of free expression, open inquiry, and respectful, productive debate on campus and in our country.”

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/12/01/new-road-map-campus-speech>

Link to download the entire report

<https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/a-new-roadmap>

### National Links

University of Florida administrators say it's okay to talk about race provided you don't use the word "critical" in the same sentence because "We do not want to inflame Tallahassee."

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/it-just-felt-wrong-u-of-florida-faculty-say-political-fears-stalled-an-initiative-on-race>

Injunction excoriates University of Florida officials for banning expert testimony by professors

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/21/us/florida-professors-free-speech.html>

Oklahoma bill would permit any parent to demand removal of any book concerning sexuality and related topics

<https://reason.com/volokh/2022/01/14/oklahoma-bill-would-effectively-let-any-parent-veto-any-public-school-library-book/>

Oklahoma bill would tell teachers what they can't teach about slavery

<https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2022/01/04/oklahoma-bill-would-ban-teaching-facts-about-slavery>

Teaching about race and history

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/revising-americas-racist-past/2022/01>

Library book censorship

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/librarians-fight-back-against-efforts-to-ban-books-in-schools/2022/01>

N-word controversy at University of Rochester: "It is not appropriate for professors to hurl slurs at their students, but it is academically essential that professors be able to discuss slurs and how they are used. Universities ought to be able to understand the difference between the use of a word and the mention of a word."

<https://reason.com/volokh/2021/11/30/academic-freedom-alliance-letter-to-the-university-of-rochester/>

When professors offend students

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/when-professors-offend-students>

Greg Lukianoff argues that we have entered a new Great Age of Political Correctness

<https://reason.com/2021/12/13/the-second-great-age-of-political-correctness/>

### **AFCON Board of Directors**

*January 2022*

*Robert Haller, President*

*Vicki Wood, President-elect*

*Todd Schlechte, Immediate Past President  
and Webmaster*

*Peggy Adair, Secretary and Legislative  
Liaison*

*Rod Wagner, Treasurer*

*David Moshman, Policy Coordinator and  
Newsletter Editor*

*Shee Covarrubias, Communications  
Coordinator*

*John Bender*

*Kari Bulgrin*

*Nancy Comer*

*Laurie Thomas Lee*

*Wyatt Packard*

### **JOIN OR RENEW**

*Rod Wagner, Treasurer*

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**The AFCON Sentinel** is the newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska, published bimonthly in February, April, June, August, October, and December. Unless otherwise indicated, articles represent the views of the authors.

Editor: David Moshman

email: [dmoshman1@unl.edu](mailto:dmoshman1@unl.edu)



**Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska  
Board of Directors Meeting**

Via Videoconference  
December 11, 2021  
aka Glitchy Zoom Day

Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison  
John Bender, representing UNL Faculty Senate  
Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy Association  
Bob Haller, president-elect, chief baker, director at large  
Laurie Thomas Lee, representing ACLU Nebraska  
Dave Moshman, newsletter editor, policy coordinator, executive vice secretary  
Todd Schlechte, president  
Rod Wagner, treasurer, representing Nebraska Center for the Book  
Vicki Wood, director at large

**MINUTES**

President Todd Schlechte called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

MINUTES: A motion was made by Moshman, second by Haller, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on October 9, 2021. Motion carried on a voice vote.

TREASURER'S REPORT: Wagner reported balance on hand as of December 11, 2021, is \$3,267.13. Treasurer's report will be filed for audit.

NEWSLETTER: Articles for the next issue of the *Sentinel* are due by January 24, 2022.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT: Schlechte reported he has received positive feedback from attendees of the AFCON annual meeting.

POLICY COORDINATOR: Moshman discussed the National Coalition Against Censorship's statement of concern regarding the growing number and intensity of censorship efforts in educational settings. The statement has been endorsed by 800+ organizations and individuals. It is titled, "The Attack on Books in Schools" and can be found on the coalition's website, [ncac.org](http://ncac.org). Moshman made a motion, second by Haller, that AFCON shall endorse the NCAC statement. Motion carried on a voice vote. President Schlechte will send a letter of official AFCON

endorsement to NCAC. A motion was made by Moshman, second by Haller, that AFCON shall join the National Coalition Against Censorship. Motion carried on a voice vote.

PAYPAL: The board discussed the issue of PayPal's discriminatory practices regarding Palestine and Palestinian people. Wagner will contact former board member Ally Halley to get her insight and suggestions. The board agreed by consensus to monitor the issue and take no further action at this time.

UNL DIVERSITY PLAN: Governor Ricketts inserted himself into university business by attacking UNL's plan to support inclusion and equity in the university system. Paul Olson has invited AFCON to participate in a coalition opposing the governor's actions and supporting the university's diversity plan. The board agreed by consensus to take no formal action at this time, but Moshman will contact Olson to let him know AFCON supports the coalition. The board also agreed by consensus to monitor what UNL actually does to carry out their plan.

MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS:

ACLU Nebraska: Lee reported the ACLU annual meeting was held via Zoom on November 15, 2021.

Nebraska State Literacy Association: Comer reported the recent NSLA newsletters are excellent but she has concerns they are not being read.

Nebraska Library Association: Packard reported via email the NLA board met on December 10, 2021. The NLA board took action to address recent problems with the selection process for the Golden Sower Award. The board will establish clear selection criteria and the selection committee will be a standing committee that answers to the full board.

AFCON ELECTIONS:

Moshman will design tamper-proof ballots and send them to AFCON members via email. An automatic recount and several audits are anticipated.

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

Respectfully submitted,  
Peggy Adair, secretary