

# The AFCON Sentinel

*Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska*

Volume 29, Number 1

February 2025

\*\*\*\*\*

## Academic Neutrality and Scholasticide in Gaza

David Moshman



On January 6, at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association (AHA), members voted 428 to 88 in support of a [“Resolution to Oppose Scholasticide in Gaza.”](#)

The resolution noted that Israel has killed hundreds of teachers and professors and has destroyed 80% of Gaza’s schools, all of its university campuses, and hundreds of archives, libraries, cultural centers, museums, and bookstores, including “the al-Aqsa University library, which preserved crucial documents and other materials related to the history and culture of Gaza.”

The resolution concluded, “be it resolved that the AHA, which supports the right of all peoples to freely teach and learn about their past, condemns the Israeli violence in Gaza that undermines that right; ... that the AHA calls for a permanent ceasefire to halt the scholasticide documented above; [and] that the AHA form a committee to assist in rebuilding Gaza’s educational infrastructure.”

This left it up to the AHA elected council at a subsequent meeting to approve the resolution, veto it, or send it to a vote of the membership. The council [vetoed the resolution](#) as “outside the scope of the Association’s mission and purpose.” Many other organizations have considered, and some have adopted, similar resolutions.

Such resolutions have been sharply criticized by many as political statements that undermine the scholarly integrity of the organizations that adopt them. Scholarly organizations, many have argued, should be politically neutral. (For critiques of the AHA resolution, see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#); for a response to the veto, see [here](#); for articles about the controversy, see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).)

Before considering the specific questions raised in the present case, let’s step back a moment and look more generally at the issue of political neutrality in academia. Scholarship is often contrasted with politics. Politics is about action, about changing the world, not just understanding and explaining it. Should scholarly work be politically neutral?

The answer, I suggest, is yes and no: Scholarly work requires political neutrality in some senses but not in others. Scholarly work requires making academic judgments of truth on the basis of evidence and argument without regard to political aims or commitments, but it does not require scholars to avoid studying or teaching about politically controversial topics nor does it require them to remain neutral about ideas simply because they are politically controversial.

The question of political neutrality often comes up with regard to institutional statements such as announcements from presidents speaking on behalf of their universities or resolutions adopted by academic departments or, as in this case, scholarly groups. Should schools, colleges, departments, and scholarly groups be politically neutral?

Here too, I think the best answer is yes and no. Academic entities such as these should not endorse particular political candidates or parties but they may reasonably decide in some cases to make public statements consistent with their missions, especially if they have special expertise on the topic, even if those statements may be politically controversial.

Here's a Nebraska example. When I was a professor of educational psychology at UNL, the department included professional programs in counseling psychology and school psychology, which taught, and expected students to follow, the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA). For several years beginning about 2007, the Nebraska Catholic Conference, with the support of the governor and other prominent Republican officials, was pushing for a revision of the ethical standards governing the practice of psychology in Nebraska. The proposed change would have permitted a psychologist who finds out that a client is gay to effectively tell the client "I don't counsel people like you, and I don't know anyone who does."

In response, the educational psychology faculty voted to issue a departmental statement that the proposed change would be [contrary to APA ethical standards](#), which are flexible about allowing psychologists to discontinue services but would require offering a referral under these circumstances. The proposed revision, we warned, threatened the national reputation and accreditation of Nebraska psychology programs. Regardless of political controversy, it seemed proper and important to provide a factual statement about the ethical principles governing psychological practice in the United States and the potential consequences of Nebraska rejecting those principles. Other psychological groups issued similar statements.

With these considerations in mind, we should ask three questions regarding the resolution to oppose scholasticide in Gaza: (1) Is it true that Israel has committed scholasticide in Gaza? (2) Is it within the mission of the AHA to oppose scholasticide? (3) Is it helpful for AHA to take an official stance on this issue?

With regard to the first question, I think the facts clearly justify the charge of scholasticide. Israel did not just disrupt the teaching of history in Gaza, which by itself would have been good reasons for historians to be concerned. It essentially terminated formal education in all subjects at all levels of education by systematically destroying Gaza's academic institutions.

With regard to the second question, I think scholarly organizations should support academic freedom and oppose threats to academic freedom. Scholasticide is the ultimate violation of academic freedom in that it destroys entire educational systems and associated academic resources. The AHA Council deemed opposition to scholasticide not to be within the mission established by the AHA Constitution, but this seems to me a questionable interpretation of the constitutional language it quoted [in its own statement](#). If support for academic freedom in research and teaching about history is not within the mission of the AHA, moreover, I think it should revise its mission.

Finally, the AHA could reasonably decide that passing this resolution will serve a useful purpose, or even that it is a moral and scholarly obligation, but that is a decision for it to make, with due consideration of what sorts of actions it has taken in the past and what sorts of issues may come up in the future. Under the circumstances, especially given the strong support for the resolution among those voting at the annual meeting, I think the AHA Council should either have accepted the decision or left it to a vote of the full membership.

Should scholarly organizations respond to scholasticide? Not every organization in all cases, perhaps, but it is certainly reasonable for them to consider doing so, and is arguably, in some cases, a moral and academic obligation.

-----

*David Moshman is the author of seven books including [Reasoning, Argumentation, and Deliberative Democracy](#). A version of this article will appear in his forthcoming book, *Gaza, Genocide, and Academic Freedom*, which expands on [this earlier post](#). For a partial draft of the book, email [dmoshman1@unl.edu](mailto:dmoshman1@unl.edu).*

## Academic Freedom Nebraska Case Repository

David Moshman

In October 2024, AFCON launched the **Academic Freedom Nebraska Case Repository**, a searchable collection of Nebraska cases involving intellectual freedom in academic contexts. The repository can be found on the AFCON website:

<https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/case-repository.html>

The repository can be searched by *issue* (e.g., curriculum, research, book censorship, student press; politics; harassment/hostile environment); *course/topic* (e.g., history, religion, sexuality, violence, race/ethnicity, LGBTQ+); *type of*

*institution* (K-12 education, higher education, library); *target* (e.g., teacher, student, researcher); *time period* (cases range from 1870 to 2024); or *place* (with cases from more than dozen Nebraska cities). It can also be searched for any combination of these categories.

For example, of the 87 cases currently in the repository, 23 involve matters of race or ethnicity. Subdividing by institution type we find 12 of these cases in higher education (including 1 in a college library), 11 in K-12 education (including 3 in school libraries), and 4 in libraries (all four also categorized in either K-12 or higher education). In Nebraska, as elsewhere, controversy and censorship related to race or ethnicity are common at all levels of education.

In contrast, if we look at book censorship broken down by type of institution, we find that none of the 16 cases involve higher education, 13 involve K-12 education (including 8 in school libraries), and 11 involve libraries (counting again the same 8 in school libraries). In Nebraska, as elsewhere, book banning is mostly associated with K-12 education and libraries, and especially school libraries. But as the repository makes clear, attacks and restrictions on intellectual freedom in higher education are also common; they simply take different forms.

We hope this resource will be useful to anyone interested in learning, teaching, or writing about intellectual freedom in academic contexts of education and research. We are happy to hear from anyone with knowledge about these cases or about others that should be added. We are also happy to cooperate with anyone interested in expanding this project to other states or to national databases. If you have questions, comments, suggestions, additions, or corrections, email David Moshman at [dmoshman1@unl.edu](mailto:dmoshman1@unl.edu).

-----



## The 109th Legislature

**Vicki Wood**

As the dust settles after the flurry of bill introductions, those concerned with academic and intellectual freedom have taken a preliminary look at what bills may warrant attention in this legislative session.

Here are a few worth watching:

LB551, introduced by Central City Sen. Loren Lippincott, would eliminate tenure protection for professors at the University of Nebraska, the Nebraska State College System and the state's community colleges. This is a repeat attempt to eliminate tenure. LB1064, introduced at the last session was indefinitely postponed.

Speaking of Senator Lippincott, he has reintroduced his bills that would “Authorize a school district to hire a chaplain to perform the duties of a school counselor without a certificate issued by the Commissioner of Education”, and “Authorize a school board to adopt a policy for participation in an elective course in religious instruction conducted off school district property by a sponsoring entity”. These bills didn't make it out of committee last year, for practical, as well as constitutional reasons but he's trying again.

Notably missing are bills seeking to criminalize librarians and educators if children access “pornography” or “obscenity” in school curriculum or library materials. There is **“A BILL FOR AN ACT relating to schools; to require each school board of a public school district to adopt a policy relating to access by a parent, guardian, or educational decisionmaker to certain school library information.”** Library professionals will be monitoring this one. Librarians generally support a parent's right to help select what their children read, however automating every school library catalog, making it accessible to every parent, and providing parents with information on what their child has checked out would be costly and labor-intensive. Surely it is not fiscally neutral and libraries that have instituted these policies have very few takers.



## I Read the 2024-25 Golden Sower Nominees for Grades K-2 and Lived to Tell!

Vicki Wood



Sue Greenwald, of the formerly named Protect Nebraska Children, is trying to stir up controversy about this year's selections for the Little Bluestem category, intended for children in grades K-2, in a substack called Forward Nebraska. All I could learn about this substack is that it stands for "education and heartland values" and was started two years ago.

In a very long [diatribe](#) Ms. Greenwald states that **"Parents are finding some of the Golden Sower books are reflecting the views of a "Marxist lesbian" much more than they reflect the views of the typical Nebraska family."** The Marxist lesbian comment is in reference to a statement jokingly made by 2023 ALA President Emily Drabinski (a library labor organizer) after she was elected.

In this article, she includes a letter from a parent to the school librarian in which the parent questions the appropriateness of the books. There is a long back and forth between the

parent, the librarian, and the principal, with dramatic interpretations provided occasionally by Ms. Greenwald. The parent doesn't include titles but seems to be referring to [Poopsie Gets Lost](#) by Hannah Harrison, in which a comfort-loving cat is cajoled into a jungle adventure by a pushy narrator when she states that, "How is leading an innocent kitten into dangerous and scary situations a positive lesson for first graders?"

She also has an issue with [I'm a Unicorn](#) by Michaela Schuett. A little calf is born with one horn and deduces that they are a unicorn. Mom doesn't like this book because we don't want to teach kids that a cow can be anything but a cow. Among the nominees is a book about the child who advocated for more "flesh colors" in crayons and one featuring a child struggling with writing who happens to be Muslim. According to this parent, these are "promoting literature from Muslim activists and children swept into the social justice movement." Ironically, Ms. Greenwald mentions the book [Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs](#) by Judy Barrett, the 1983 Golden Sower winner, as the type of book that "has stood the test of time". Honestly, do we want children to believe that the sky rains pasta? Where's the logic in that?

Children's books have existed for decades as cautionary tales certainly, but much more often purely as entertainment, to ignite the imagination, or for just plain silliness. But, don't take it from me. Read a few of these [titles](#) for yourself...if you dare.

---

Vicki Wood is a retired youth librarian and past president of AFCON.

## 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.

AFCON Board of Directors

*Wyatt Packard, President*

*Peggy Adair, Secretary and Legislative Liaison*

*Rod Wagner, Treasurer*

*David Moshman, Policy Coordinator*

*Todd Schlechte, Webmaster*

*Vicki Wood, Newsletter Editor*

*John Bender*

*Shee Covarrubias*

*Kari Bulgrin*

*Nancy Comer*

*Robert Haller*

*Laurie Thomas Lee*

*Regina Werum*

From the AFCON Constitution, Article I:

The purpose of AFCON shall be to promote academic freedom in Nebraska, defined as intellectual freedom in educational and research contexts. This includes freedoms of belief and expression and access to information and ideas. In pursuit of this general goal, AFCON shall:

1. Support application of the First Amendment in academic contexts, including schools, colleges, universities, and libraries.
2. Educate Nebraskans in and out of Academic settings, citizens and professionals, parents and students about the meaning and value of intellectual freedom, intellectual diversity, mutual respect, open communication, and uninhibited pursuit of knowledge, including the role of these ideals in academic contexts and in democratic self government.
3. Assist students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and others confronted with censorship, indoctrination, or suppression of information or ideas in academic settings.
4. Act as liaison among groups in the State of Nebraska that support academic freedom.

## ***JOIN OR RENEW***

Rod Wagner, Treasurer

If you are interested in defending and expanding academic freedom in Nebraska, we welcome you or your organization as a member of AFCON. Annual dues are \$120 for institutions, \$15 for individuals, and \$5 for students. Individual life memberships are available for \$150. You can pay by visiting our website at <https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/>

Memberships and donations can also be made by check (payable to AFCON). Send check to AFCON Treasurer, 3901 S. 27th St.,#47, Lincoln NE 68502.

Organizational members are entitled to a representative on the AFCON board. We also have at-large board members. You may express your interest to the president to be considered for appointment to the board.

## **Local Links**

**More than 50 votes later, divided Nebraska State Board of Education picks a president**

[https://www.newspressnow.com/news/regional\\_news/nebraska/more-than-50-votes-later-divided-nebraska-state-board-of-education-picks-a-president/article\\_2e2bbdb3-70df-5304-bf42-8f98c900ccca.html](https://www.newspressnow.com/news/regional_news/nebraska/more-than-50-votes-later-divided-nebraska-state-board-of-education-picks-a-president/article_2e2bbdb3-70df-5304-bf42-8f98c900ccca.html)

**Banning book bans: Nebraska should join the free reading club**

<https://nebraskaexaminer.com/2025/01/06/banning-book-bans-nebraska-should-join-the-free-reading-club/>

## **National Links**

**Academic Freedom Requires DEI**

<https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/views/2025/01/09/academic-freedom-requires-dei-aaup-gets-it->

**Bill to establish UI school of ‘intellectual freedom’ moves to committee**

<https://www.newsfromthestates.com/article/bill-establish-ui-school-intellectual-freedom-moves-committee>

**It’s Not a Hoax: Trump Administration Dismisses Book Ban Complaints**

<https://pen.org/not-a-hoax-trump-administration-dismisses-book-ban-complaints/>

**An overlooked defense in faculty First Amendment academic freedom and other cases**  
<https://www.reuters.com/legal/legalindustry/an-overlooked-defense-faculty-first-amendment-academic-freedom-other-cases-2025-01-21/>

Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska

Board of Directors Meeting

Via Videoconference

December 14, 2024

Present:

Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison

Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy Association

Dave Moshman, policy coordinator

Wyatt Packard, president, representing Nebraska Library Association

Rod Wagner, treasurer, representing Nebraska Center for the Book

Regina Werum, representing American Association of University Professors, UNL

**MINUTES**

President Wyatt Packard called the meeting to order at 10:02 a.m.

**MINUTES:** A motion was made by Moshman, second by Wagner, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on October 12, 2024. Motion carried by a show of hands.

**ELECTIONS:** After a careful machine count followed by a sleight-of-hand tally and bareknuckle audit, the election results have been certified as official and final. AFCON elected officers for 2025 are: John Bender, President-Elect; Rod Wagner, Treasurer, and Peggy Adair, Secretary.

**TREASURER'S REPORT:** Wagner presented the treasurer's report. Balance on hand as of December 14, 2024, is \$3,325.30.

**LEGISLATIVE UPDATE:** Adair reported the next legislative session will begin on January 8, 2025.

**NEBRASKA CASE REPOSITORY:** Moshman updated the board on the status of the Nebraska Case Repository that can be found on the AFCON website. Moshman reported on plans to expand beyond Nebraska to create a nationwide searchable case repository.



**POLICY COORDINATOR:** Moshman reported UNO proposed cutting funding to four diversity-related student groups after especially exciting promotional prizes were expensed and dispensed at a meeting. UNO claims the groups do not serve all students as required in their bylaws. The groups contend they welcome all students who want to win exciting promotional prizes. The tiff between the student groups and the university is being followed by the Gateway student press. Moshman recommended AFCON monitor the issue.

**AFCON PLANS FOR 2025:** Moshman reported a generous donor is willing to raise the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska to a new level of capacity and visibility. Moshman invited board members to think big, plan for the future of AFCON, and contemplate hiring staff to help achieve goals.

**PRESIDENT’S REPORT:** Packard reported the AFCON annual meeting with AAUP was a huge success. Packard also reported Senator Danielle Conrad received this year’s NLA advocacy award for her legislative work.

**MISCELLANEY:** Concern has been expressed regarding the whereabouts of AFCON digital files and archived materials. Board members suggested checking with the library archivist at UNO to determine the status of AFCON historical materials.

The status of the AFCON Facebook page is also a concern. Login information is unknown and the upkeep of the page is inconsistent.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:17 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Peggy Adair

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. All issues of the AFCON Sentinel are available here:  
<https://www.academicfreedomnebraska.org/the-sentinel.html>

Editor: Vicki Wood  
email: wood.vk@gmail.com