

# The AFCON Sentinel

*Newsletter of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska*

Volume 30, Number 2

April 2026

\*\*\*\*\*

## A Year of Attacks on Freedom of Thought

By John Bender



Judges often praise the value of free thought and speech in First Amendment cases. Sometimes they actually mean what they say. Once such case is *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*.

The U.S. Supreme Court decided the case in 1943, in the midst of the Second World War. The issue was whether the state could require all students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, a power West Virginia said was needed to assure national unity.

Justice Robert Jackson, who wrote the majority opinion, rejected West Virginia's argument. "If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation," Jackson wrote, "it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein."

Probably Donald Trump has never read Jackson's words, and if he has, he obviously does not believe them. Trump and his MAGA acolytes have pushed on multiple fronts to impose their orthodoxy on Americans. One of those fronts is academia.

Trump’s efforts have focused on curtailing instruction on race and gender and abolishing university programs that promote diversity and equity. One such effort was the Compact for Academic Excellence, which the Trump administration sent to select universities offering to buy their cooperation with promises of preferred access to federal funds. Wrapped in vague language and platitudes most could support were demands for actions that advance MAGA goals.

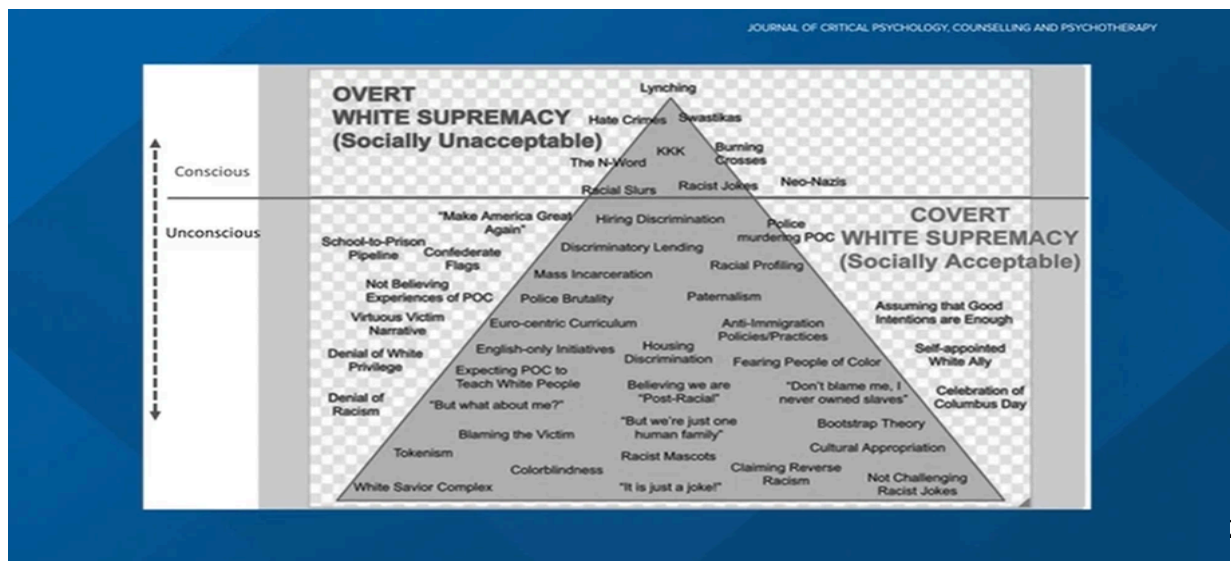
Among other things, the compact asked schools to “commit themselves to revising governance structures as necessary to create [a vibrant marketplace of ideas], including but not limited to transforming or abolishing institutional units that purposefully punish, belittle, and even spark violence against conservative ideas.” The demand perpetuates the idea academics ridicule conservative ideas simply because they are conservative.

Most universities asked to join the compact declined, but a few educators applauded the document, including some education leaders in Texas, which has produced a couple of widely publicized academic freedom cases.

In one case, Texas A&M administrators ordered philosophy professor Martin Peterson to remove Plato’s *Symposium* from the reading list for his Contemporary Moral Issues class. Plato discusses the origins of erotic love and suggests humans were originally created as pairs. Some pairs were male-male, some female-female and some male-female. The sympathetic portrayal of same-sex pairs crossed a line for the university administrators.

In another case, Texas A&M fired lecturer Melissa McCoul. In a session of her Literature for Children class, she discussed the difference between gender expression and gender identity. A student objected, “I’m not entirely sure this is legal to be teaching because, according to our president, there’s only two genders.” McCoul told the student (who should take a class in American government) that what she was teaching was legal. A faculty committee decided McCoul’s firing was unjustified and recommended her reinstatement. The university refused, so now she is suing Texas A&M.

In November, a lecturer in Indiana University’s School of Social Work, Jessica Adams, was removed from one of the four classes she was teaching because of a graphic she used that identifies forms of white supremacy. A student in the class complained because the graphic listed “Make America Great Again” as an unconscious expression of white supremacy. The student made the complaint to U.S. Sen. Jim Banks, an ally of Donald Trump’s. Banks said,



‘This type of hateful rhetoric has no place in the classroom.’ Adams was later restored to the classroom but was placed under supervision.

Many other incidents have attracted national attention, but more insidiously, academics across the country say they are becoming more cautious about what they teach and what they say. Alan Blinder, an education reporter for the New York Times, said dozens of professors in interviews and written submission have complained of feeling stifled. For instance, Marin Pilloud, an anthropology professor at the University of Nevada in Reno, said she felt compelled to present ideas that lack a scientific basis, such as the new guidance from the Centers for Disease Control on vaccines, just so she could say she was presenting a broad array of viewpoints.

These are only a few of the things Trump has done to impose a radical-right orthodoxy. I haven’t mentioned his efforts to scrub diversity and climate change from federal law and policy or his efforts to reshape history to exclude minorities and women. Trump has been president for 14 months. We have 34 months more to endure. The results of the midterm elections may slow Trump’s efforts, but they won’t stop him. People who believe as Justice Jackson did must be prepared to resist Trump and others who want to control how the rest of us think.

---

John Bender joined the faculty of the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1990. During his time at the university, Bender taught mass media law, beginning and advanced reporting classes, mass media history, graduate seminars in media law and media history, and honors seminars in freedom of expression, media ethics, and media misrepresentations of events, along with a variety of other courses. In his final two years at UNL, Bender served as associate dean for research and faculty affairs.

**Bender is retired from UNL and is currently president of AFCON.**

---



## Foreword

Mary Beth Tinker



*This is the Foreword by Mary Beth Tinker to David Moshman's [Gaza, Genocide, and Academic Freedom](#), to be published in May:*

This is a book that helps us understand genocide so that we can stop it and prevent it. Whether you are an educator, a student, or just a citizen of the world, there are lessons here for you. And for those of us in the United States painfully aware of how our taxes have been funding genocide in Gaza, there is a special responsibility to try and stop the madness. You will meet people in this book who are doing that, people who know that this will necessarily involve a fight for free speech and against censorship.

Censorship was something I learned about as a child speaking out against other atrocities, those of the Vietnam War. In 1965, when I was in eighth grade in Des Moines, Iowa, I became emotional about the daily news of bombings and killing in the war. I was raised with a religious

background, and by that time, our family was involved with the Quakers, a religion of peace.

I joined students who wore black armbands to school that year to mourn for the dead and call for a Christmas truce. For that, I was suspended along with my brother John and three others. The school board president explained that he would oppose any demonstration against national policy because we should support our leaders.

But that's not how our Constitution works. When American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) lawyer Dan Johnston explained to the U.S. Supreme Court that even students have a right to speak up and disagree with their government, we prevailed. In a landmark ruling, the Court declared that controversial speech would not be banned from public schools just for being controversial, saying "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines, 1969*).

I grew up and became a nurse, working mostly with children and teens. In trauma units, schools, and clinics, I saw the price that youth pay for policies made without their input. I began encouraging students to advocate for themselves, convinced that civic advocacy would be good for their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health.

Along the way, I met many administrators and educators living lives of integrity and civic courage. One of those was David Moshman, and I have been a fan of his work and that of the Academic Freedom Coalition of Nebraska ever since. When I heard that he was writing this book, I was excited and knew that it would be a valuable tool.

*Gaza, Genocide, and Academic Freedom* has taught me much about genocide, including the simple notion that a central feature of genocide is denial that there is indeed a genocide. In a lifetime of work, David links individual cognition and psychology to the larger civic and political world, promoting “collaborative dialogue” as a centerpiece of democracy that is so needed now to confront not only this genocide but all the issues of our day.

On April 17th, 2024, I waited in line with Columbia University students outside the Education and Workforce hearing room of the U.S. House of Representatives. They were first in line to hear their college president, Minouche Shafik, testify at a hearing on antisemitism. I was there as an advocate for academic freedom and as a nurse horrified by the atrocities in Gaza.

“I’m here because my classmates have been suspended, left homeless, and deprived of their diplomas for speaking out against the genocide in Palestine,” said a social work student. A journalism student wearing a shirt that said “Columbia” and “Gaza” added, “This is a public hearing, we’re students at Columbia

University, we came very early, and they won’t let us in. It’s very frustrating.” In the end, none of us were allowed in, and there would be over ten more “antisemitism” hearings in Congress, but none on Islamophobia.

The week before, I was with student members of a high school Muslim Student Association who wanted to host a Palestine Culture event at their school and show “The Occupation of the American Mind” at an after-school program. When they were told it would not be allowed, they pushed back, along with several teachers and the ACLU. They were finally allowed to put on their program, without the film.

In speaking up against the genocide in Gaza and the injustice toward Palestinians, I have been joined by Palestinian Americans whose family members were killed in Gaza, Israeli Jews who are veterans of the Israeli military, and others from across the world. Ours is also an inter-religious effort and I have been proud to be part of this central, defining movement of our time.

Despite the *Tinker* ruling, we are in a period of great censorship on campuses and in our communities, with pressure not to talk about “controversial” issues. At a conference of school board lawyers, several told me that many legislators and school board members don’t care about Supreme Court rulings or free speech but just want to be elected.

Despite the obstacles, it is heartening to see a growing number of students, educators, and others speaking up for justice for Palestinians, often despite substantial risks. We haven’t stopped the madness of the genocide, even as it manifests differently from month to month. But this book helps us to keep working at it by speaking out, teaching about it, and resisting censorship.



**The 109<sup>th</sup> Legislature, 2<sup>nd</sup> session will close on April 17, 2026. We will update members in the next edition of the Sentinel if there are any passed bills affecting intellectual or academic freedom.**

## **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**

*John Bender, President*

*Peggy Adair, Secretary and Legislative Liaison*

*Rod Wagner, Treasurer*

*David Moshman, Policy Coordinator*

*Todd Schlechte, Webmaster*

*Vicki Wood, Newsletter Editor*

*Kari Bulgrin*

*Nancy Comer*

*Robert Haller*

*Laurie Thomas Lee*

*Regina Werum*

*Wyatt Packard*

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:**

**Nebraska student appeals censorship of editorial cartoon**

<https://splc.org/2026/03/nebraska-student-appeals-censorship-of-editorial-cartoon/>

**Gov. Pillen partners with Turning Point USA to bring 'Club America' chapters to all high schools**

<https://www.3newsnow.com/lincoln/gov-pillen-partners-with-turning-point-usa-to-bring-club-america-chapters-to-all-high-schools>

## **National Links:**

**White House Releases National Policy Framework for Artificial Intelligence**

<https://www.swlaw.com/publication/white-house-releases-national-policy-framework-for-artificial-intelligence/>

**Cash-starved and censored, America's student press is in crisis**

<https://splc.org/2026/02/cash-starved-and-censored-americas-student-press-is-in-crisis/>

**University of Alabama shuts Black, female student magazines**

<https://apnews.com/article/university-of-alabama-dei-trump-fe2e7297f2d58b2fa753ada8a8e47888>

**U.S. Book Challenges Update: February 2026 Edition**

<https://ilovelibraries.org/article/u-s-book-challenges-update-february-2026-edition/>

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

**February 14, 2026**

**Present:**

**Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison  
John Bender, president, representing UNL Faculty Senate  
Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy Association  
Laurie Thomas Lee, president-elect, representing American Civil Liberties Union, Nebraska  
Dave Moshman, policy coordinator  
Wyatt Packard, immediate past president, representing Nebraska Library Association  
Todd Schlechte, webmaster, director at large  
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 10:23 a.m.**

**MINUTES: A motion was made by Moshman, second by Schlechte, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on January 17, 2026. Motion carried by a voice vote and show of hands.**

**TREASURER’S REPORT: Wagner reported balance on hand as of February 14, 2026, is \$4,106.51.**

**LEGISLATIVE REPORT: Adair presented a legislative report on the status of bills AFCON is monitoring. Packard updated the board on legislative bills of concern to the Nebraska Library Association.**

**BOARD OF REGENTS REPORT: Bender reported the regents recently changed their rules to allow for a two-year term for chair. The legislature’s speaker, John Arch, addressed the board with visions of a rosy financial future.**

**STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT: Comer reported state colleges have instituted a program for future teachers to be able to obtain bachelor’s and master’s degrees with fewer extraneous courses.**

**POLICY COORDINATOR: Moshman reported Governor Pillen is collaborating with Turning Point USA to bring TPUSA chapters into every public high school in Nebraska. Moshman pointed out federal law requires equal access in public schools for student clubs, so long as the clubs are student-initiated and student-led. Clubs that are initiated by a public official do not meet equal access provisions. Moshman will monitor the issue.**

**SENTINEL: Wood reported the deadline for articles for the next issue of the Sentinel is March 26, 2026.**

**REPORTS FROM MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS:**

**Nebraska Library Association – Packard reported NLA Advocacy Day will be March 16, 2026, in Lincoln.**

**The NLA will hold a joint annual conference with Mountain Plains Library Association in October. The conference will take place in LaVista, Nebraska. Deadline for session proposals is March 31, 2026.**

**Nebraska Center for the Book – The Center for the Book is sponsoring Letters About Literature, a contest for young Nebraska students to write a letter to an author. Contest winners will be recognized at an event in April.**

**NEXT MEETING: The next AFCON board meeting will be Saturday, March 14, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. via Zoom.**

**There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 11:31 a.m.**

**Respectfully submitted,  
Peggy Adair**

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

**March 14, 2026**

**Present:**

**Peggy Adair, secretary, legislative liaison**

**John Bender, president, representing UNL Faculty Senate**

**Nancy Comer, representing Nebraska State Literacy 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**

**Regina Werum, representing American Association of University Professors, UNL**

**MINUTES**

**President John Bender called the meeting to order at 10:16 a.m.**

**MINUTES: A motion was made by Wagner, second by Lee, to approve minutes of the AFCON board meeting held on February 14, 2026. Motion carried by a voice vote and show of hands.**

**TREASURER’S REPORT: Wagner reported balance on hand as of March 14, 2026, is \$4,106.51; with a shout-out to our Cathi McMurtry, treasurer emeritus, who recently renewed her AFCON membership. Hey, Girl.**

**LEGISLATIVE REPORT:** Adair presented an updated legislative report on the status of bills AFCON is monitoring. The last day of the current legislative session will be Friday, April 17, 2026.

**STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION REPORT:** Comer reported the state board recently voted down accepting federal grant money to support preschoolers, the mental health of students and mental health professional development. The reasons for their rejections of the grants are opaque.

**UNL FACULTY SENATE:** Werum reported the Faculty Senate and the AAUP-UNL are frustrated with the university leadership's actions that undermine tenure and academic freedom.

**SENTINEL:** The deadline for articles for the next issue of the Sentinel is March 26, 2026.

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

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 10:59 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>