

Faculty Senate Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Overview and Comments regarding the September 2023 Incident at the College of Nursing*

Overview

Sometime before September 6, 2023, an advanced practice nursing student in the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program at the College of Nursing photographed slides during a clinical immersion class that considered complex issues that may be encountered in advanced clinical practice. The slides that were photographed addressed gender identity in the pediatric care setting. Against the social media policies of the College that apply to all nursing students, and in flagrant disregard of principles discussed in a class on nursing professionalism, the student shared photos of the lecture slides with groups outside the University and without context provided during the lecture. The photos were then weaponized by outside groups, and posted on various social media sites on September 6. A social media firestorm resulted. Some faculty and staff at the College received threatening phone calls and emails, and many of these were documented by the Threat Assessment and Management Team (TAMT).

In order to address the social media firestorm, the College, in consultation with the University, quickly prepared a statement that was released on September 8. Please find this statement at <https://www.nursing.arizona.edu/news/2023-09-08-statement-college-nursing-doctoral-student-seminar>

While this statement clarified that College faculty share evidence-based information, the statement also said that College faculty members “do not recommend any specific practice guidelines related to gender-related issues.” Of particular concern, the statement did not affirm the right and responsibility of faculty to teach principles of evidence-based care to nursing students, including care for LGBTQ+ people, or express support for the faculty members involved. In addition, the statement did not address the violent threats that faculty and staff at the College were experiencing stemming from the incident, nor did it express support for the health and well-being of members of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, it did not express a commitment on the part of the College to principles of academic freedom, including the ability of faculty to teach and students to learn about gender-affirming care and LGBTQ+ health issues.

On September 21, a communication was sent from members of a campus faculty, staff, and student organization to President Robert Robbins, Vice President Craig Henderson, Interim Provost Ronald Marx, College of Nursing Dean Brian Ahn, Interim Associate Vice Provost of DEI Jenna Hatcher, and Faculty Chair Leila Hudson regarding how the University had distanced itself from gender-affirming care principles taught in the clinical immersion class and how the statement on September 8 did not defend academic freedom. The communication from the campus organization also noted significant concern about how the College statement was harmful and “further contributes to the violence against transgender people, including transgender youth, and University of Arizona’s transgender employees and students.”

*This document has been updated to correct a factual error in the version posted on Sept 29. In that document, it was stated that photographs of lecture slides were taken on Sept 6. Instead, these photos were posted to social media on Sept 6.

On September 22, Dean Brian Ahn and Vice President of Health Sciences Michael Dake sent a message to the College of Nursing community that affirmed the commitment of the College of Nursing to “to the health, safety and well-being of all, including members of our LGBTQA+ community, and their medical care,” as well as the College’s support and expectation that faculty will use evidence-based research in their teaching. This message also affirmed the College’s commitment to principles of academic freedom. Finally, the message summarized the extensive steps that were taken to ensure the safety of the College community, and mentioned a series of upcoming faculty forums that will discuss gender-affirming care. While this message was not posted to the College’s website, it can be viewed at:

<https://view.comms.arizona.edu/?qs=1aaff6d2919a81a96e9811c1a97e562a32db01229d6d85eb34d0f4197fb659238a82dcc70cdf9bfd43358c01dff581e729389064928eea73b83ba7d309a9864185df29a533f9927268d00cd47620909>

Comments from the Senate DEI Committee

This event reminds us that in difficult situations involving exceptional external pressure, **it is imperative that college and university-level leadership take explicit steps to express support for the evidence-based teaching, service, and research** performed by faculty, especially when that work involves content that may be controversial but is supported by evidence. **By doing so, the leadership will also support our faculty and academic freedom as foundations of our academic enterprise.** We must all acknowledge that our people are our most valuable resource.

A threat to one part of our academic community is a threat to us all. We must not tolerate repression of ideas, or violence or intimidation of any kind.

As a university community, we courageously strive to teach our students, perform our research, and provide service to our communities in ways that are supported by evidence. **We must remember that the courage we show in our scholarship often supports those beyond the borders of our campuses.**

Faculty forums should be held at the College of Nursing, and at other units, in order to discuss topics around academic freedom. Such forums should be a place for open discussions that are genuine, so that faculty - of all ranks and tracks - can feel heard, and actually be heard. Only then can faculty be supported in the ways that they should be.

This issue, rather than being an isolated incident, is part of a larger attack on higher education and DEI efforts (e.g., attacks on DEI statements in job postings). Cowring and accommodating these attacks does not stop them. Rather, they embolden these attacks. University leaders need to take a stronger and more proactive stance against these threats.

Regardless of individual positions of administrators on these issues, we must teach evidence-based practices for health and wellness of all, regardless of political pressure from those outside the University.