Amanda Gailey, an English professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, started receiving hate mail after she protested a Turning Point USA (TPUSA) recruiting event on her campus. She got so much of it that she organizes it by theme. There’s the “c-word” category, for people who call her a cunt, and another for mutilated animal photos.¹

For Olga Perez-Stable Cox, a psychology instructor at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, the harassment began after a student recorded and distributed critical comments she made in class about Donald Trump’s election. One email warned, “We’re cleaning out the rats, starting with shooting you like the rat you are.”²

Rabab Abdulhadi, a professor of ethnic studies at San Francisco State who advocated for Palestinian issues,³ came to campus one day to find posters plastered across campus that described her and her students as “terrorist supporters.”

In an effort to silence academics, right-wing activists, including many from the Alt Right, have doxed, threatened, and smeared professors across the country, without regard for academic hierarchy, type of institution, or discipline. They have attacked professors with and without tenure. Their victims work at research institutions and liberal arts colleges and in public and private schools. They teach in the humanities, social and life sciences.

Despite the pervasiveness of such attacks, it can sometimes be difficult to identify the individuals or groups behind them. Some are associated with Alt Right figures like Milo Yiannopoulos, who has a history of encouraging “trolling” campaigns, where anonymous internet users swarm an individual’s social media feeds and email with inventive and threats of violence. Others are involved in White nationalist circles.⁵ Still other trolls operate independently, but take their cues from groups loosely affiliated with the Alt Right, such as TPUSA, whose founder, Charlie Kirk, is a Breitbart contributor.⁶ A small portion of trolls are likely motivated more by sadism than politics.⁷

Wherever they sit in the wider Alt Right ecosystem, trolls typically justify their attacks in two ways. Some argue that professors are “cosmopolitan elites,” Alt Right, other professors respond by playing it safe.⁹

Most importantly, with nationalism and fascism both on the rise, the wider common good is at stake. Universities provide a powerful place where these ideologies can be challenged. However, if universities fail to defend professors attacked by the Alt Right, their students are more likely to accept Alt Right groups organizing college students as legitimate actors. To better understand how universities respond to Alt Right attacks on academics, I interviewed three professors: Amanda Gailey, Johnny Eric Williams, and Dorothy Kim. I supplement these interviews with cases from the public record.

**BECOMING AN ALT RIGHT TARGET**

Although many professors are targeted for their work on race, any number of liberal positions can trigger attacks: supporting queer and transgender rights; criticizing Donald Trump; protesting right-wing groups like TPUSA and Identity Evropa. Professors usually get on the Alt Right’s radar in one of three ways.

**Right-Wing Media**

Right-wing media outlets like Campus Reform, which defines itself as a “watchdog to the nation’s higher education system,”¹⁰ play a central role in the targeting process. With a small staff in Arlington, Virginia, student correspondents who pen “exposés” about their professors, and a “send a tip” link,¹¹ Campus Reform’s strategy is to feed names into the Far Right ecosystem so that trolls can launch harassment campaigns against them. According to The Chronicle of Higher Edu-
cation, The Academic-Alt Right Grapevine

Academia is often stereotyped as a haven for liberal professors, but it houses conservative scholars as well. In recent years, some conservative professors have aligned themselves with Alt Right personalities and used their supporters to attack academic rivals. Dorothy Kim, an assistant professor of medieval literature at Vassar, experienced this after she drew the ire of fellow medievalist and Alt Right sympathetic Rachel Fulton Brown. Although they had never met, Kim challenged Fulton Brown’s statements across a wide variety of academic outlets and social media, including on a private Facebook group for medieval feminist scholars (where Fulton Brown was also a member). Fulton Brown and Kim’s differences started more than two years ago when Fulton Brown began publically espousing Alt Right views about Whiteness and masculinity on her blog. Although they had never met, Kim challenged Fulton Brown’s statements across a wide variety of academic outlets and social media, including on a private Facebook group for medieval feminist scholars (where Fulton Brown was also a member). If the debate had stopped there, it would have been unremarkable. Academic disputes are often rough and tumble. But things changed when Kim wrote a blog post after the deadly Alt Right march last August in Charlottesville, Virginia, criticizing the “weaponization” of her discipline and imploring the field’s senior scholars to denounce the Alt Right’s cooption of medieval history for racist purposes. Fulton Brown responded by bringing in Alt Right reinforcements. In promoting her blog rejoinder to Kim on Facebook, Fulton Brown tagged Alt Right personality Milo Yiannopoulos, who has over 2.5 million Facebook followers and remains close to Breitbart, his former employer. The following day, Breitbart published an article about the row: “Lady With a Sword Beats Down Fake Scholar with Facts and Fury.”

Fulton Brown then spent the next two weeks writing about Kim on her blog, mirroring the tactics of “Gamergate,” intentionally drumming up chatter about Kim so trolls would go on the attack. It worked. The threats started coming in after Breitbart posted its story and ticked up each time Fulton Brown mentioned Kim by name.

When I interviewed Kim, she told me that Fulton Brown “keeps bringing my name up,” explaining, “She wants to be an Alt Right media pundit and I’m her strawman to get there.”

THE NATURE OF ALT RIGHT ATTACKS

Once a professor is on the Alt Right’s radar, trolls pounce quickly. Their attacks are personal and vicious and, for the period of time they last—anywhere from a few weeks to several months—unrelenting. Most attacks occur in cyberspace, but some bleed into real life. The most common line of attack is doxing—publishing someone’s private information online. Most professors already have public profiles. Doxers go further, hunting down social security numbers, digging up the names of children, and tracking down home addresses, with Google Earth screenshots attached. Doxers then disseminate the information across the Alt Right ecosystem. Attacks can go on for weeks. Even after the dust settles, the threats never completely stop. As Dorothy Kim explained, “Once you are in their crosshairs, it’s like you’re being stalked forever.”

TYPES OF RESPONSES

Universities respond to Alt Right at-
tacks against their professors in several ways. In a robust response, a school defends the attacked professor’s academic freedom, offers due process if disciplinary action is being considered, and communicates the reasons for its decision to the professor and the wider public. A weak response, by contrast, usually entails on-the-spot dismissal without due process. Most responses fall somewhere in between: administrators offer a tepid defense of academic freedom, grant due process, but only late in the game, or give different explanations to public and private audiences.

Robust Defense

Dorothy Kim’s case provides a good example of a robust response. When I asked Kim how she would rate Vassar’s performance, she told me: “I got all the practical things I wanted.” Her first request to Vassar was simple—“Don’t put me on immediate leave.” Kim knew that she had done nothing wrong, but she was also aware that universities sometimes try to quiet troll storms by putting professors on leave. “I had seen what happened at Trinity and Drexel,” she explained, referring to George Ciccariello-Maher and another targeted professor, Johnny Eric Williams, “so it was my number one ask.”

Kim also asked the college to remove the location of her classes from the website and to give her a different, unlisted office. On her own, Kim started holding office hours in the student cafeteria because only people with Vassar ID can get in.

Kim also requested that campus security do extra loops around her on-campus home and asked university housing to replace her name on the property deed so trolls could not discover where she lived.

Finally, Kim asked Vassar’s president to defend her publically. The president agreed to Kim’s request and posted a statement on the college’s webpage a few days later. Although the statement didn’t mention Kim or Fulton-Brown by name, it reiterated the college’s support for academic freedom and decried the use of threats of violence to shut it down.

On-the-Spot Reproach

University bureaucracies often move at a glacial pace. When universities decide to adopt punitive measures against attacked faculty, however, they can move quickly. The experience of Lisa Durden, an adjunct professor of communications at Essex County College in New Jersey, is a case in point.

In early summer 2017, Fox News personality Tucker Carlson invited Durden onto his talk show to discuss an upcoming Black Lives Matter BBQ that was not open to White people. In what became a contentious interview, Durden defended the decision and expressed little sympathy for those who thought the BBQ should be open to supporters of all races. “White folks crack me up,” she said. “When we have one day for Black folks to focus on ourselves, but you’ve been having White day forever.”

The college said it was inundated with complaints. Two days after the appearance, Durden was suspended for the remainder of the semester.

Durden told a local media outlet that she was never given a formal explanation for her suspension and did not receive due process before the decision was made. The college’s Human Resources department told her she’d been suspended because she mentioned her affiliation with Essex on Carlson’s show, although she had not. The next communication Durden received was an email saying the college would no longer need her for the fall term.

The first and only explanation Durden would receive came after her contract was severed, when Essex president Anthony Munroe issued a formal statement. Munroe acknowledged that Durden did not represent her views as those of the college on the show and affirmed the Essex’s commitment to “free speech and academic freedom.” However, he also asserted that Durden’s comments were not consistent with the college’s values. “The character of this institution mandates that we embrace diversity, inclusion,
and unity. Racism cannot be fought with more racism.” Durden was displeased with the explanation, telling a local radio show, “[Munroe] called me a racist!...So, are you calling Black Lives Matter racist?”

Hans-Joerg Tiede, at the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), called Essex’s response a textbook example of what not to do. “There was no due process, she was basically fired on the spot.” Tiede said that Durden’s case was also indicative of another troubling pattern: the particular lack of “due process for adjuncts or non-tenure track faculty.”

In January of this year an open records request by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) called into question the university’s claim that it had been inundated with complaints. In the 13-day period between Durden’s cancelled class and her suspension, the university only received one email complaining about her appearance on Carlson’s show.

Muddled Approaches

Most universities muddle through Far Right attacks. Johnny Eric Williams’ case at Trinity College in Connecticut and Amanda Gailey’s case at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln provide two snapshots of what such flat-footed responses look like.

Johnny Eric Williams

The ordeal for Johnny Eric Williams, a sociology professor at Trinity College in Connecticut, began in mid-June 2017, after he tweeted a link to a Medium essay by the pseudonymous writer Son of Baldwin entitled, “Let Them Fucking Die.”

The piece discussed how a Black, queer, female police officer saved the life of Rep. Steven Scalise (R-LA), a right-wing politician who once spoke to a White supremacist group and who opposes LGBTQ rights. Son of Baldwin used this “delicious irony” as a jumping off point to ask whether minorities should save racial bigots in distress. His ultimate answer was “no”—“do nothing...Let. Them. Fucking. Die.” A few days later, Williams tweeted two related comments, using the hashtag #LetThemFuckingDie, to refer readers back to the article that sparked his comments. One tweet read: “It is past time for the racially oppressed to do what people who believe themselves to be ‘white’ will not do, put end to the vectors of their destructive mythology of whiteness and their white supremacy system.”

Williams said his tweets weren’t advocating violence against White people, but rather calling for an end to the ideology of Whiteness and the system of White supremacy. But the furor around them erupted so rapidly that he was unable to defend himself. Two days after he’d posted the tweets, Campus Reform posted an article attacking Williams, without reaching out to him first. That day he received a call from the conservative website Realclearlife asking for comment. Williams hadn’t even known about the first article—“I had to ask the caller what he was talking about,” he told me—but by then a narrative was already congealing. Campus Reform said Williams supported killing White people “inhuman.”

“There was no due process, she was basically fired on the spot.”

Joanne Berger-Sweeney, issued a public statement critical of Williams’ posts, writing, “In my opinion his use of the hashtag was reprehensible and, at the very least, in poor judgment.” She also announced that the Dean of Faculty would conduct a review to determine whether Williams had breached university policy.

Williams next received a call from his department chair, who asked if he would go on paid leave. His Dean called next to press the case. Worried, Williams called a lawyer, who advised him against taking leave, since it could be read as an admission of guilt. The next time he heard from the college it was to inform him that he was being placed on involuntary paid leave, although the review that President Berger-Sweeney had promised was not even underway. The news was devastating. “I can’t believe I can’t teach,” Williams told me. “That’s my identity.”

Fortunately, when the review was completed in July, it offered a strong exoneration of Williams. Tim Cresswell, Trinity’s Dean of Faculty and Vice President of Academic Affairs, affirmed that Professor Williams’ tweets were “protected exercises of academic freedom”; that faculty members have the right to express opinions at odds with political orthodoxy and public opinion; and that far from constituting a threat of violence, Williams’ tweets “fall squarely within his area of scholarship.” Cresswell also dismissed attempts to blame Williams for the threats leveled at the college, noting that they were “more attributable to extreme reactions to his posts than to the actual statements in the posts themselves.”

Although Cresswell’s report vindicated Williams, the college’s prior actions—failing initially to defend Williams’ academic freedom or right to due process—weakened the overall effect. And Berger-Sweeney only reinforced the bad feelings by releasing a public statement after Cresswell’s report, continuing to criticize Williams’ tweets. “It had a chilling effect,” Williams told me. “It ceded the territory to Campus Reform.”

Amanda Gailey

In some ways, Amanda Gailey’s ordeal
is similar. When the Alt Right media machine turned its sights on her, Gailey's university was also hesitant to publically defend her. However, because she works at a public university—the University of Nebraska-Lincoln—Gailey also had to contend with the state legislature.

Gailey's troubles began at the start of the fall 2017 term, when she heard that TPUSA would be on her campus to recruit students. Like many professors, Gailey opposes TPUSA’s Professor Watchlist. “Their entire objective is to intimidate you into silence.” Instead of being cowed, however, Gailey had asked to be put on the watchlist. Up until that point the group had ignored her requests, so when Gailey heard about a protest in the works, she decided to attend, carrying a homemade poster that read, “Turning Point: Please put me on your watchlist.”

But when Gailey arrived at the event, she couldn’t tell “who was protesting whom.” Gailey positioned herself away from the scrum, near the TPUSA recruiting table. A short while later Gailey noticed that the student managing the table, Kaitlyn Mullen, was crying. “I rolled up my sign and walked over to ask her if she was ok,” she recalled. The student seemed overwhelmed, so Gailey asked the student protestors to cool things down. She tried to reassure Mullen, telling her, “I don’t want anyone to be upset. No one is protesting you. It’s your organization they are protesting.”

She gave Mullen her email address and offered to meet with her, but had a bad feeling about the encounter. “I knew immediately that this was going to turn into something,” Gailey told me, so she called her department chair the same day to warn him. Gailey’s hunch proved accurate. A few hours later, TPUSA had posted a video of the protest on its Facebook page and, misleadingly, included an old photo of Gailey. Although the video footage was taken before Gailey was even on campus, its caption suggested that she had been present during the filming and had harassed the student: “Radical Professor Amanda Gailey (off camera)

At University of Nebraska-Lincoln Leads Public Harassment Of Conservative College Students.” Gailey was angry. “It was a total fabrication.”

Although Gailey came to the protest by herself, another instructor—Courtney Lawton, a graduate student lecturer in the English Department—had also attended. Gailey told me she saw Lawton standing with her back to the TPUSA table. At some point, someone with TPUSA came around the table to film Lawton. After TPUSA edited the video, it appeared as though Lawton had initiated a confrontation with the student. And, though the TPUSA video did not contain footage of Gailey at the protest, the video’s caption suggesting she was off-camera when Lawton was being filmed linked their cases and ultimately put the English department in the crosshairs.

Gailey and her Dean spoke about the event the following Monday. By then, however, other Alt Right outlets had pounced on the story. The university started on the back foot and made several errors going forward.

The first mistake, Gailey explained, was the decision by Hank Bounds, the University of Nebraska system’s president, to issue an apology on Monday. Gailey was incredulous. “I had been telling them all along that [TPUSA] are lying about my involvement.” Gailey would find out later that video footage from campus security cameras backed up her account. Two months after the protest, Gailey was finally allowed to watch the video in the Chancellor’s office. Not only did the video cast Courtney Lawton’s actions in a more positive light, she said, but “it verified that I was in another area [away from the scrum].”

The second mistake was to approach the hate swarm as a public relations problem. Gailey recalled the university’s communications team told her, “We can’t tell you to not talk to the press, but let us handle it.” Gailey was uneasy with the approach, but decided to “go with the flow.” Unfortunately, the PR team’s response was slow and halting. By then, Gailey said, the narrative “had gotten out of control. The Omaha World-Herald said I’d accosted the student.”

The university’s third mistake was to refuse to publically correct TPUSA’s claims even after eyewitness accounts and security videos called it into question. Indeed, the university still refuses to release the footage to the public or acknowledge that it exonerates Gailey.

The university’s failure to set the record straight left Gailey open to attack. Shortly after the August protest, for example, University of Nebraska Regent Hal Daub complained to a Nebraska state legislator that Gailey’s

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The university’s failure to set the record straight left Gailey open to attack. Shortly after the August protest, for example, University of Nebraska Regent Hal Daub complained to a Nebraska state legislator that Gailey’s
and Lawton that mention Betsey Riot (an activist group in Lincoln) or any Republican lawmaker by name. The chairman of the Nebraska Republican Party also joined the fray, requesting five months of email communication between the chair of the English department and any faculty or administrator.

In mid-October, UNL’s chancellor Ronnie Green decided to try to calm the waters by calling another round of individual meetings with Gailey, Lawton, and Mullen. After Mullen met with the chancellor, however, she reopened the debate on twitter by complaining about the English department’s mission statement, and suggesting that it was “teaching students to be social justice warriors.”

To Gailey, the attacks appeared coordinated between Nebraska’s Republican establishment and TPUSA. Indeed, a few days after Mullen’s tweets, three Republican state senators sent an open letter to the president and chancellor that echoed Mullen’s complaints, grumbling that the department’s mission statement lacked “traditional English Department words such as ‘classic literature studies,’ ‘writing,’ ‘poetry,’ ‘fiction,’ ‘grammar,’ and ‘novel.’”

On October 31, a few days after the senators sent their open letter, Bounds and UNL Chancellor Ronnie Green finally offered a public defense of the English department in separate letters. But by then, the Alt Right’s narrative had gone unchallenged for two-and-a-half months, becoming the definitive account. Gailey’s opponents were in a position to double down. One of the senators, Steve Halloran, told The Hastings Tribune that he and his colleagues were going to continue to “hold government accountable,” since UNL “is a government-funded university.”

In response, Bounds seemed to cave, announcing that Courtney Lawton’s contract would not be renewed the following academic year. (Initially, Lawton had been reassigned from her teaching duties but had remained an employee.) Bounds and Green also announced the university was hiring a polling firm to assess the campus political climate for conservatives.

The Nebraska GOP remained dissatisfied. In late November they issued another open records request, this one targeted at administrators. It asked for all email communications mentioning Courtney Lawton and Kaitlyn Mullen.

The headlines notwithstanding, the university agrees that Gailey did not berate Mullen at the August protest and affirms that she was within her rights to go to the protest and carry a sign. Still, things have been difficult for Gailey. “I have not been disciplined,” she said, “but they are still trying to get me fired.”

Gailey’s case demonstrates that in public universities, academic freedom is under assault not only from outside agitators, but also from state legislators working in concert with such groups.

BEST PRACTICES

In a 2017 report, the AAUP made two recommendations for how universities should respond when professors are attacked. First, university actors, from governing boards and high-level administrators to college deans and faculty, must aggressively defend academic freedom both collectively and individually. Second, administrators should develop policies that limit or prohibit “surreptitious recording of classroom discourse or of private meetings between students and faculty.” These recommendations are a good start, but universities can do more, including the following:

Condemn Threats

Unflattering stories about professors in Campus Reform and similar outlets rarely lead to constructive debate. Rather, they often beget harassment campaigns against targeted professors. Universities must not only condemn the threats but also the role that outlets like Campus Reform play in encouraging them.

Although condemning threats of violence should be an obvious response, some universities never even acknowledge that their professors receive them. In his first comments about the protest at UNL, for example, University of Nebraska system President Hank Bounds condemned protestors’ behavior towards Kaitlyn Mullen but ignored the hate mail sent to Amanda Gailey and the death threats lodged against Courtney Lawton.

Other universities denounce threats of violence but bury the lede. When Trin-
Get Educated

Many administrators don’t understand how online harassment works. Dorothy Kim told me that she had to explain what doxing was to one administrator. Another dean questioned her account because he did not see anything about it on Twitter. Kim had to explain that the Alt Right was “deplatformed” after the Charlottesville rally, as Twitter banned several Alt Right accounts and others canceled their accounts in protest. As a result, the Alt Right turned to smaller forums, like subreddits, to plan attacks, and took cues from writers sympathetic to the Alt Right. “Pizzagate is the perfect example,” Kim told me. “People didn’t see it coming because it wasn’t discussed in the usual places.”

Correct the Factual Record

One of the hallmarks of Campus Reform and TPUSA stories is inaccuracy. In Gailey’s case, both groups’ stories contained basic factual errors. The caption for the TPUSA video, for example, inaccurately stated that Gailey was “off camera” during the filming. Both outlets also claimed that Gailey harassed Kaitlyn Mullen, when, in fact, she’d comforted her. Eyewitness accounts from the protest, as well as the university’s own security footage, contradict these statements. Yet the university never demanded corrections. When local newspapers repeated the inaccuracies, the university let them go unchallenged. Administrators’ failure to publically correct the record made it easier for the legislature and one of its regents to unfairly call for Gailey’s dismissal.

Develop a Counter-Narrative

The errors in stories by Campus Reform, TPUSA, and others are not the result of sloppy fact checking, but rather an agenda to get liberal professors fired. Accordingly, though correcting factual errors is important, this must be accompanied by a counter-narrative of events from the university. Williams’ case provides a good example. The Campus Reform article about Williams’ tweets used a heading that attributed Son of Baldwin’s comments to Williams and accused him of impugning all White people. In her first public memo, Trinity President Berger-Sweeney made it clear that Williams was not Son of Baldwin, but she failed to put his tweets into context. As Williams explained in our interview, critical race scholars do not believe that race is “real” in a biological sense. Nor do they equate Whiteness and White people. Rather, they teach that Whiteness is an ideology used to justify dominance. Within this context, Williams’ tweets, in which he put scare quotes around the word “White,” look very different.

Gailey’s case also illustrates the importance of developing a counter-narrative. The Nebraska Republican Party used a factual error forwarded by TPUSA—that Gailey had harassed a TPUSA student volunteer—to claim that conservatives’ free speech was under assault and that Gailey should be fired. A good counter-narrative would have noted two things. First, the First Amendment does not guarantee anyone a compliant audience. Heckling, making fun of political opponents, and carrying posters are just as protected as setting up a recruitment table. Second, if you defend Mullen’s right to recruit for TPUSA, you have to defend Gailey’s right to protest the organization.

Universities also should counter the Alt Right’s use of the free speech mantle to legitimize what is essentially harassment. As Dorothy Kim told me, her case “was not really a free speech issue.” Instead, Kim argued that by tagging Milo Yiannopoulos, Rachel Fulton Brown was “sending violence my way.” Although Kim was grateful that Vassar administrators met her safety requests, she was disappointed that the university handled her case as if it were about free speech.

The Alt Right has made no secret of the fact that it sees universities and colleges as a battleground. With little resistance from universities, the movement’s attacks on professors are likely to continue, if not accelerate.
endnotes

War on the Ivory Tower, p. 15

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