

University of Illinois Protected White Supremacist, but Fires Steven Salaita For Criticizing Israel

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Image: Steven Salaita ([Jeffrey Putney](#))

The [American Association of University Professors](#) (AAUP) has issued a [damning report](#) on the [University of Illinois'](#) firing of [Steven Salaita](#) that sets the stage for the institution to be censured.

Censure, which must be voted on by the AAUP's annual meeting, is a rare and grave sanction aimed at "[informing](#) association members, the profession at large, and the public that unsatisfactory conditions of academic freedom and tenure have been found to prevail."

It is a damaging stain that most institutions would go to great lengths to avoid. Even before a possible censure, the AAUP report is certain to reinforce the boycott of the university which has seen prominent academics including [Cornel West](#), [UCLA](#) Jewish studies director [Todd Presner](#) and Brandeis law professor [Anita Hill](#) cancel campus appearances.

Salaita was fired last August as he was about to take up a tenured faculty position in the American Indian Studies program at the [Urbana-Champaign](#) (UIUC) campus, because of tweets criticizing Israel's attack on Gaza that administrators deemed lacked "civility."

By doing so, the university violated the AAUP's long-standing and highly influential [principles on academic freedom and tenure](#), the report concludes.

Salaita was "dismissed"

The AAUP report confirms – based on precedents dating back to 1962 as well as generally accepted practices applied to the facts of this case – that the university's decision constituted a "dismissal" of Salaita and not a mere withdrawal of a job offer.

Salaita was therefore entitled to full protections of his academic freedom and to due process, all of which the university violated.

The report meticulously examines the "civility" excuse cited by UIUC chancellor [Phyllis Wise](#) and finds that her claim Salaita's tweets would make him an unfit teacher amounts to "pure speculation."

AAUP has long argued that "civility" and "collegiality" are vague standards applied by the powerful to the marginal in order to enforce conformity with prevailing ideas.

In the past, the report points out, standards of civility were used “by aristocrats to distinguish themselves from the bourgeoisie” and by “Christians to establish their superiority to Muslims and Jews.”

Faculty fear

In its interviews with faculty on campus, the AAUP investigative committee heard much concern about a “chilling effect” on free speech because of the Salaita decision.

There were “reports that nontenured faculty members in particular feel threatened and that many, especially in the humanities, are seeking positions elsewhere because they fear the university will not support them if there is outside criticism of their work.”

One professor told the committee that the university’s conduct had been “tremendously devastating” to faculty morale.

Hardest hit are programs that are already marginalized – ethnic studies and particularly the internationally renowned American Indian Studies program.

One professor told the committee, “I don’t know of one faculty member [in those programs] not looking for another job,” an observation reiterated by an administrator, the report states.

“Foreign-born, noncitizen faculty members, many of whom teach in language programs on a part-time basis,” and faculty who “who teach Arabic or who are Muslim” feel “particularly intimidated by Professor Salaita’s dismissal,” it adds.

Adjunct faculty feel a heightened risk and the, report adds, the “fears of many non-tenure-track faculty members have been exacerbated” by the administration’s hostility to unionization efforts.

Protecting bigotry

Two earlier examples relating to free speech mentioned in the AAUP report highlight the University of Illinois’ sheer hypocrisy in firing Salaita.

In 2010, the religion department decided not to reappoint a part-time professor to teach a course on Catholicism after he sent an email to students that some felt expressed anti-gay views.

“Out of concern about academic freedom, however, the UIUC administration decided to overrule” the department “and hired him to teach the course,” the report notes.

In the Salaita case, administrators specifically cited concerns students might be made uncomfortable by his statements – expressed outside the classroom – about Israel. They apparently had no such concern for LGBTQ students.

There is another stark contrast with Salaita in the case of long-time, now retired, faculty member Professor Robert Weissberg.

According to the AAUP report, Weissberg “regularly advocated principles of white supremacy” and frequently spoke at white supremacist gatherings. Among the views he

espouses is that “Blacks generally have a well-deserved reputation for hair-triggered collective violence.”

“The administration took no action against him, reflecting a tolerance for offensive extramural expression not witnessed in the Salaita case,” the report notes.

The AAUP report largely endorses the findings of the UIUC academic senate’s own [Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#), which last December faulted the administration’s violations of policy and procedures.

Chancellor Wise announced she would ignore its recommendations, including for the decision to fire Salaita to be reconsidered.

Given that reality, it would be surprising if Wise and the university trustees who backed her decision reverse course willingly – even in the face of likely censure.

In January, Salaita [filed a lawsuit](#) against university trustees, administrators and donors over his firing.

The case still in early stages of litigation.

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