



Open Letter in Support of Dr. Allyn Walker

December 3, 2021

We are writing this open letter to publicly share our concerns pertaining to the events leading up to the joint decision between Old Dominion University and Dr. Allyn Walker to have Dr. Walker step down from their position as Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice. We lament the loss of our dear colleague and call for explicit and immediate improvements in communication, due process, and protections of academic freedom by the administration leading Old Dominion University. For context, here is the timeline of events:

- **Thursday, May 20th, 2021:** Dr. Walker, the Chair of Sociology and Criminal Justice, and the Dean of Arts and Letters share a detailed memo that outlines how Dr. Walker's book could be misconstrued and that provides talking points to refute any misconceptions. This memo was shared with Provost Agho, Vice Provost Hawkins, President Broderick, Vice President Genard, and Chief Harris.
- **June 2021:** Dr. Walker's book, *A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity*, is published with University of California Press.
- **Monday, November 8th, 2021:** Prostasia Foundation shares 29-minute video interview conducted with Dr. Allyn Walker on YouTube, during which Dr. Walker clearly explains the scope, purpose, and terminology associated with their book, *A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity* (2021, Univ. of California Press).
- **Thursday, November 11th, 2021:** Twitter accounts share a 54-second excerpt from Dr. Walker's interview with Prostasia with the caption, "This non-binary assistant professor at Old Dominion University is trying to normalize the term MAP (Minor Attracted Persons)."
- **Saturday, November 13th, 2021:** Old Dominion University releases a statement (see Appendix A) to convey their commitment to academic freedom and to give Dr. Walker another opportunity to speak directly to the community.
- **Tuesday, November 16th, 2021:** Dr. Allyn Walker is placed on administrative leave, immediately after teaching in the morning their first two classes on campus since their interview went viral over social media.
- **Tuesday, November 16th, 2021:** President Brian Hemphill sends a message to the Old Dominion University community in the evening titled, "A Challenging Time for Our Campus and Community" (see Appendix B), in which the decision to place Dr. Walker on administrative leave is justified through the lens of personal and campus safety.
- **Wednesday, November 24th, 2021:** "A Joint Statement from Old Dominion University and Dr. Allyn Walker" was released, announcing that Dr. Walker will stay on leave until May 2022 and will step down from their position at that time.
- **Thursday, December 2nd, 2021:** The Office of Academic Affairs sends a message to all faculty (see Appendix C) articulating their vision of academic freedom and its scope.

There are other key events involved in the precipitation of the most recent joint decision announced on November 24th, but these moments are the most critical from our perspective.

Communication

Dr. Walker has consistently produced meaningful, rigorous research on several topics in the field of criminal justice. In fact, Dr. Walker's research has been cited over 260 times since 2013 according to Google Scholar metrics. Their most recent work, a book titled *A Long, Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity* (2021), was published by a highly reputable press in sociology (University of California Press) and thus passed the threshold of blind peer review in the field. The book covers an understudied demographic (minor-attracted people, or MAPs, a term Dr. Walker uses but did not coin), building off their dissertation work, which Old Dominion was fully aware of at the time of their hiring. Further, Dr. Walker received intramural funding from Old Dominion to support such research. It is clear that their area of research (which is an emerging area of research with a good number of researchers participating in it) was also fully known when they were initially hired and was supported by colleagues outside their department by way of an anonymous grant review process.

Our chapter is naturally upset at the consistent mischaracterization of Dr. Walker's work in social media, and the blatant and inexcusable transphobia by those outside our university fueling it. We realize that these reactions are challenging to control, if they are controllable to any extent, and we are grateful to the university administration for foregrounding campus safety. That said, we believe Old Dominion leadership could have done much more to resist the power of the misreading of Dr. Walker's work and protect their work and reputation in their messaging. This is especially true since Dr. Walker and their department and college took the time to inform upper administration of potential blowback against their book following publication. The University could have used insights provided by faculty to draw useful distinctions between the value of Dr. Walker's work, their right to pursue it, and the discomfort and controversy around the topic itself. Dr. Walker has been clear about the purpose of their research and its social value, especially as it pertains to preventing harm and child abuse. *We encourage the administration to (a) engage in more statements clarifying the university's commitment to academic freedom, with particular acknowledgment of the misrepresentation of Dr. Walker's work, and (b) establish more effective upward channels of communication to ensure faculty concerns are taken more seriously in the future.*

Due Process

Old Dominion faculty, staff, and students—along with the public—have much work to do in ensuring that we all create the safe conditions for the pursuit of academic freedom and explain its value to the communities our institutions serve. A critical component to maintaining academic freedom is due process. Without transparent due process, commitments to hiring and retaining diverse faculty and supporting controversial social justice research that appear in the “ONE Virginia Strategic Plan for Inclusive Excellence,” signed by President Hemphill in the summer of 2021, will continue to be jeopardized.¹

We have concerns about how the *Teaching and Research Faculty Handbook* was applied in this situation, especially as it pertains to due process. Although campus safety is paramount, and we appreciate the steps taken by our leadership, police, and threat assessment teams to be

¹ We find strategy six listed under *Goal 2: Climate and Intergroup Relations, Objective 1: Create a campus environment that advances equity, diversity, inclusion, civility, and wellness for all students, faculty, and staff* to be pertinent: “Educate the university community on the prevention of harassment, discrimination and identity-based violence as well as related equity policies” (p. 9). A significant part to the public reaction to Dr. Walker's work was their gender identity, and this needs to be acknowledged.

sensitive to this, we must be cautious using it to interpret or implement existing policy (see BOV 1433 Administrative Leave, at odu.edu/about/policiesandprocedures/bov). That Dr. Walker was placed on administrative leave without their immediately knowing or without any dialogue, and that campus safety does not seem to be a reason stated in the *Teaching and Research Faculty Handbook* for enacting administrative leave raises concern for our chapter. We understand and appreciate the motivation to keep Dr. Walker and our students safe from any violence but are concerned about the longer-term implications of using BOV Policy 1433 in this manner, especially if faculty are not informed about the degree of violence being threatened. *We call for (a) clarification to all teaching and research faculty of this policy and how the administration can implement it and (b) a formalized process to deal with threats related to research and/or instruction created with input from appropriate levels of university governance and affinity groups, including steps for consultation with the affected individual and supervisors as well as support for the affected individual and campus community.*

Protections of Academic Freedom

As noted above, we are concerned about the repercussions of this case and the way Dr. Walker was treated by the university as it pertains to diversity, inclusion, and recruitment. If we as an institution seek to recruit and retain faculty members who engage in research topics and methodologies the general public might resist, then we as faculty, staff, students, and administration need to work together to ensure that faculty are fairly protected from media and public outrage. We respect civil dialogue and the mission of our institution to serve the public as a state school, but faculty should not be placed on leave involuntarily or fear non-renewal of their contract because of public misunderstanding of research. The administration should serve as the protective barrier between faculty, their research, and the public; faculty and administration need to work as one body to counter uninformed outrage, mischaracterization, and misled notions of academic freedom. This is a joint effort, and we invite the administration to include faculty in these conversations about strategizing protections for future faculty so we do not lose another cherished colleague like Dr. Allyn Walker.

We stand in solidarity with Dr. Allyn Walker and seek to work with and not against Old Dominion administration in ensuring better communication, improved due process, and protections for our research.

Signed,
AAUP Old Dominion University Chapter

Appendix A

An academic community plays a valuable role in the quest for knowledge. A vital part of this is being willing to consider scientific and other empirical data that may involve controversial issues and perspectives. Following a recent interview that gained national attention, Dr. Allyn Walker has released the following statement.

“I want to be clear: child sexual abuse is morally wrong and inexcusable crime. As an assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice, the goal of my research is to prevent crime. My work is informed by my past experience and advocacy as a social worker counseling victims. I embarked on this research in hopes of gaining understanding of a group that, previously, has not been studied in order to identify ways to protect children.”

Following recent social media activity and direct outreach to the institution, it is important to share that Old Dominion, as a caring and inclusive community, does not endorse or promote crimes against children or any form of criminal activity.

Appendix B

Dear Students, Faculty, and Staff:

These last few days have been a challenging time for our campus and our community. As many of you are aware, our University has been at the center of much controversy surrounding a faculty member’s description of research concerning pedophilia, a subject that is not only sensitive, but is also personally traumatic for many.

In recent days, as I have been engaging with our students, faculty, staff, alumni, supporters, and community members, I have been struck by how many people have personally endured the tragedy of child sexual abuse in some way. For them, especially, this is a challenging time, triggering terrible memories and causing fresh pain.

Many individuals have shared with me the view that the phrase “minor-attracted people” is inappropriate and should not be utilized as a euphemism for behavior that is illegal, morally unacceptable, and profoundly damaging. It is important to call pedophilia what it is. As a father, I am troubled by this narrative and its potential consequences for my children and that of future generations.

Ideally, we would be able to debate even the most challenging issues without disruption or threats of violence, but that is not the world we live in today. Our campus has recently become the target of threats and other unacceptable disruption.

As the President of Old Dominion University, my foremost responsibility is for the safety of everyone associated with the campus. For this reason, Dr. Allyn Walker has been placed on administrative leave. Additional actions have been taken to enhance safety and security, and I encourage everyone to look out for each other and report anything of concern immediately. Additionally, a public statement, as attached, is being shared with media outlets, as well as posted on the University’s website and social media accounts.

Research into sensitive topics and the expression of new or controversial views lie at the heart of academic research. Old Dominion University remains committed to providing an environment in which our faculty can and will engage in rigorous research. At the same time, this freedom carries with it the obligation to speak and write with care and precision, particularly on a subject that has caused pain in so many lives. I am confident that our Monarch family will

rise to the occasion in our continuing campus dialogue, and I am equally confident that we share a common starting point for the discussion: rejection of any form of sexual abuse of children.

I encourage all Monarchs, both near and far, to reach out to each other, offer support, and utilize ODU's counseling services or Employee Assistance Program whenever it may be helpful to do so. I know that we will work our way through these difficult issues together as a Monarch family!

Warmest Regards,

Brian O. Hemphill, Ph.D.
President

Appendix C

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing you today about two important, closely related values that have become parts of our campus conversation over the past few weeks – free speech and academic freedom.

The concepts of free speech and academic freedom both bear directly on ODU's core mission and on my responsibility as Provost to ensure that we are a place of learning with the free exchange of ideas and pursuit of fearless inquiry.

The principle of academic freedom is essential to enable members of the University community to rigorously pursue research wherever it leads, even – perhaps especially – when it involves sensitive and controversial subjects. President Hemphill and I are absolutely committed to upholding it. Academic freedom protects not only scholarly research, but also robust debate on its merits. It does not, however, confer immunity from criticism. Old Dominion, like all universities, supports the right of all individuals to speak out, protest and express their views. Moreover, as a public institution, we recognize that our commitment to free speech is not merely an academic value. It is a First Amendment obligation under the Constitution.

That freedom of expression is subject to reasonable limitations – what the law often refers to as “time, place and manner” – to ensure it does not intrude on the rights of others, including their right to physical safety. As a Monarch family, we should exercise that right in a manner consistent with our values of civility and respect. Within those very reasonable guardrails, vigorous debate is encouraged.

I invite you to join me in echoing President Hemphill's affirmation of our commitment to academic freedom and his condemnation of any efforts to threaten, coerce or intimidate any member of our academic community. We encourage free speech, dissent and the expression of controversial views. We will continue to protect academic freedom and the ability to pursue difficult or unorthodox research topics, along with the right to criticize that research. In our true Monarch spirit, let us continue to engage in fruitful dialogue while we respect one another as we grow stronger as a community of scholars.

Sincerely,
Austin O. Agho, Ph.D.,
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs