

March 29, 2021

**Open Letter to the Members of the
ND House Appropriations Committee – Education and Environment**

Dear Chairman Monson and Committee Members,

I am writing to you in my capacity as NDSU Faculty Senate President to extend my full support to **Professor Molly Secor-Turner, Ph.D.**, and for her scholarship that has benefited so many citizens of the state of North Dakota, including your constituents in the districts you represent. Professor Secor-Turner is a highly respected and successful member of the NDSU academic community, and her research has been supported through an extremely competitive federal grant that only highlights the caliber of her scientific work with applications for the betterment of our fellow citizens in our state and further afield. Conversely, I am expressing my **sharp disagreement** with and **firm opposition** to the course the proceedings related to the ND Senate Bill 2030 amendments have taken and the misinformed way in which committee members have questioned Professor Secor-Turner's work to fit the committee members' political or moral ideologies. These actions are now tantamount to **an assault on the integrity of academic freedom principles** at NDSU and within NDUS.

The initial deliberations in the ND Legislature on the said amendments were already concerning and, consequently, our faculty members have made their dissent publicly known through a [Faculty Senate Resolution](#), an [Open Letter](#) and [Committee Testimony](#). Unfortunately, at the moment, it appears these calls to respect and uphold academic freedom and to separate reason from conjecture have gone unheeded. Consequently, I am strongly reiterating these concerns here and I respectfully urge the committee members to review these materials for a better understanding of the negative implications unsubstantiated legislative interference can have on the sound functioning of higher education institutions and the individuals that serve them.

Academic freedom is the core principle on which faculty members rely to conduct their work and pursue their lifelong career goals. The **public institutions** to which faculty members devote their time and efforts are bound by **state legislation** and **internal policy prescriptions** to defend academic freedom. This principle is protected both at NDUS level via [SBHE Policies 401.1](#) and [605.1](#), and through institutional-level policies within NDUS (at NDSU, [Policy 325](#)). For example, SBHE Policy 401.1, Section 2, unequivocally establishes academic freedom as the “...*freedom, without institutional, political, or other outside pressure or restraint, to explore any avenues of scholarship, research, and creative expression, and to speak or write on matters of public concern...*” and states that “*faculty members shall be free to involve interested students or other professionals in their scholarship or research and to pursue funding from internal or external sources to*

support it.” Similarly, NDSU Policy 352, Section 1 states that academic freedom “provides a safe haven for the expression of diverse points of view by faculty, students and guests of the University, free from interference by administrators, SBHE members or other government officials.” Importantly, SBHE Policy 605.1, Section 1 states that an institution “cannot fulfill its purpose of transmitting, evaluating, and extending knowledge if it requires conformity with any orthodoxy of content and method.”

The deliberations and discussions currently going in the Education and Environment committee regarding Professor Secor-Turner’s grant and research related to it run counter to the letter of these policies and constitute a flagrant interference in the work of academics to conduct the research inherent to their career goals. In Professor Secor-Turner’s case, legislators appear to have objections with the criteria and requirements of the federal grant she has been awarded over the past decade from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grant requires that this research be conducted in partnership with an agency in North Dakota that meets the federal regulations and guidelines for the provision of family planning and sexual education services. Planned Parenthood meets these requirements, and is highly qualified to provide the support and to deliver the curriculum resulting from Professor Secor-Turner’s work. In addition, this partnership and the work conducted throughout the duration of the grant has been found in compliance with state regulations.

An even more alarming development in the committee’s proceedings is the manner in which committee members have resorted to intimidation tactics, the threat of legal repercussions and imposition of financial penalties to prevent the legitimate pursuit of scholarly work that has been demonstrated to be beneficial to our fellow citizens, but that legislators may consider at odds with their own convictions. This represents an abuse of power by some of the committee members and an attempt to dictate how a faculty member’s research should be conducted, what grant should sponsor it and that any curriculum resulting from such work should satisfy personal preferences of particular legislators. This approach will set a dangerous precedent with cascading effects for other areas of scholarship legislators might find objectionable. These might include but not be limited to research on genetically modified agricultural products, biomedical engineering, renewable forms of energy or, in teaching, the development of diverse and inclusive curricula. In other words, where will the political interference into academic freedom stop and how much damage will have been done at that point?

In sum, I respectfully urge you to reconsider your approach to this issue and take into consideration the expert opinion on the nature of the research being conducted by Professor Secor-Turner. Nothing less than the protection of academic freedom is at stake here and the democratic norms that govern it.

Sincerely,



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Faculty Senate President