

Date: September 8, 2016

To: Members of the Faculty Affairs Committee, A&S; Faculty Affairs Committee, FA; Executive Committee, FA

From: P. Geoffrey Feiss, Professor of Geology and Provost Emeritus; Terry L. Meyers, Chancellor Professor of English Emeritus; Kathleen F. Slevin, Chancellor Professor of Sociology Emerita

Subject: A Disturbing Violation of the Faculty Handbook

Dear Colleagues:

The three of us have been profoundly disturbed by recent actions of the William and Mary administration that have effectively fired a senior member of the Faculty in violation of the letter and spirit of the Faculty Handbook.

We write to bring this matter to your attention with the expectation that the large and clear threat to academic freedom at William and Mary will compel the strongest and most urgent response from the Faculty.

In all our years of service at the College, these actions constitute the most egregious evisceration of the Faculty Handbook that we have seen and indeed could imagine.

This matter concerns Professor of Government David Dessler, who has come to us legitimately distraught about the way he has been treated and who has been so far unable through his own efforts in several directions to get the College to observe his rights under the Handbook.

We are sympathetic to Professor Dessler in the matter of procedural fairness, though we take no stand on the other circumstances of his situation. Whatever those are seems from the evidence available to center around medical and other matters beyond our knowledge and competence.

But in examining materials made available by Professor Dessler on the web and in one case (PGF) as a consequence of numerous phone and email conversations, we see unconscionable actions taken to fire him without regard for the existing and appropriate procedures spelled out in the Handbook.

If Professor Dessler is deprived of his rights in this matter, if the procedures of the Faculty Handbook are simply thrown out the window, faculty rights at the College are indeed under an existential threat and in jeopardy for each and every member of the College faculty. Each would be subject to arbitrary and extrajudicial treatment, with all the implications that would entail.

We note that Professor Dessler has taken several actions, including an appeal to the AAUP. We hope to avoid the impending embarrassment to the College and the professional stain on our administrators by urging steps that we believe, though belated, are still open.

Professor Dessler, as you can see from a document in the pdf on the web (email from John Poma, August 8, 2016, 5:31 p.m.), is regarded by the administration to be in a peculiar and undefined position where, no longer employed by the College, he nevertheless retains his “tenure status” and is “eligible to be reconsidered for reinstatement.”

We recommend as a reasonable first step towards resolution of this matter that Professor Dessler immediately be “reinstated” to his salaried position.

A second necessary step would restore to Professor Dessler the rights to due process required by the Handbook; his case should be considered ab ovo, moved back to where it should have started, with the process guided by the procedures where medical conditions might require the consideration a faculty member in a tenured position.

We cannot overstate the seriousness of this matter and the danger currently existing to the rights of faculty members at the College of William and Mary.