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After my son and daughter-in-law left Wyoming to serve at Texas A&M University ("TAMU") I became interested in Texas politics via online readings of the Texas Tribune. I also visit College Station during the worst of Wyoming winters. Recently two controversies roiled TAMU.

Here is what the Texas Tribune has to say about the latest one. Its headline of July 26, 2023, reads "Texas A&M suspends professor accused of criticizing Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in lecture." The article explains how Joy Alonzo, a respected professor and expert on opioids, got into trouble for a lecture that included disparaging remarks about the lieutenant governor pushing certain laws that make harm-reduction difficult—Texas has opted for harsher sentences for dealers and users. UTMB required all students to attend Alonzo's lecture, and one student texted her mother about the professor's negative remarks. It happens, the student's mother is Texas Land Commissioner Dawn Buckingham, a graduate of UTMB's medical school; her daughter, a first-year medical student at UTMB, attended Alonzo's lecture. Buckingham had served six years in the Texas Senate with Patrick, who endorsed her run for land commissioner. Buckingham immediately informed the Lt. governor, who took quick action.

Patrick's complaint landed on the desk of TAMU Chancellor John Sharp, a former state comptroller who now holds the highest-ranking position in the Texas A&M University System, which includes 11 public universities and 153,000 students. Sharp immediately touched base with the lieutenant governor about the incident. Less than two hours after the lecture ended, the lieutenant governor's chief of staff had sent Sharp a link to Alonzo's professional bio.

Sharp responded with a text sent directly to the lieutenant governor: "Joy Alonzo has

been placed on administrative leave pending investigation re firing her.” shud [sic] be finished by end of week.” The text message was signed “jsharp.”

As the situation developed, TAMU officials updated Patrick and his team. At the same time, the government relations team alerted the Health Science Center and the pharmacy school, which are affiliated with Alonzo.

A few hours after TAMU started looking into the bruhaha, as Alonzo learned that controversy was brewing, a course coordinator at UTMB sent an email to the entire class distancing UTMB from comments Alonzo allegedly made about Patrick. The subject line read, “STATEMENT OF FORMAL CENSURE.”

“The statements made by the guest lecturer do not represent the opinion or position of the University of Texas Medical Branch, nor are they considered as core curriculum content for this course,” the email said.

“UTMB does not support or condone these comments. We take these matters very seriously and wish to express our disapproval of the comment and apologize for harm it may have caused for members of our community,” the email continued. “We hereby issue a formal censure of these statements and will take steps to ensure that such behavior does not happen in the future.” The email did not specify what comments had led to the censure.

Neither UTMB nor TAMU would confirm what Alonzo said that prompted such a reaction. UTMB students interviewed by the Texas Tribune recalled a vague reference to Patrick’s office but nothing specific. One student who spoke on condition of anonymity said Alonzo talked about how policies like the state’s ban on fentanyl test strips have a direct impact on the ability to prevent opioid overdoses and deaths.

Despite support from top Republicans, including Governor Abbot, a push to legalize the

test strips died earlier this year in the Patrick-led Senate. Patrick also prioritized a bill that would limit certain conversations about race and gender in college classrooms. Last year, when professors at UT-Austin publicly reaffirmed their academic freedom to teach critical race theory, Patrick pledged to ban tenure in public universities. Ultimately that proposal was unsuccessful, but faculty say the broad attack on higher education has made Texas a less appealing and more difficult place to work.

As the situation developed, TAMU officials updated Patrick and his team. Eventually, the Alonzo case went out with a whimper. She was swiftly cleared of all charges.

Lucas Hill, a clinical associate professor of pharmacy at the University of Texas at Austin, wrote in his letter that Alonzo was not a divisive educator. “While I was not present during her guest lecture at the University of Texas Medical Branch this morning, my interactions with Dr. Alonzo give me great confidence that she engages learners in discussions of controversial topics with the professionalism and restraint described in established principles of academic freedom,” he wrote.

The stakes are high for professors who simultaneously work in their fields and teach, many of whom, like Alonzo, do not have tenure. And it raises concerns that medical experts working on high-stakes issues like the opioid crisis might withhold important, life-saving information out of fear of reprimand or punishment.

“When we’re dealing with basic life-saving interventions, chilling effects can have much more deep consequences,” said Aaron Ferguson, an addiction treatment expert in Austin who works with researchers at public universities to combat opioid overdoses. “People don’t feel emboldened to share basic science that could save people’s lives.”

Alonzo’s predicament came as Texas universities deal with increasing government

involvement in ostensibly independent public universities, particularly at the hand of Patrick. This year, Texas lawmakers banned diversity, equity, and inclusion offices on college campuses, a priority for Patrick. These offices target underrepresented groups on campus to help them succeed, but critics accuse them of pushing “woke,” left-leaning ideology on students and faculty.

Now to the earlier case. In June, TAMU celebrated the hiring of Kathleen McElroy, a respected journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin, to revive A&M’s journalism program. TAMU organized a signing ceremony on campus to celebrate a new chapter for the school’s journalism department. McElroy, flanked by maroon and white balloons, signed an offer letter for a tenured faculty position, but in the weeks after the signing ceremony, administrators walked back their offer amid conservative backlash to the hiring.

Some members of the university system’s board of regents, who are appointed by the governor, said they wanted to promote conservative causes at the flagship campus and resisted efforts to hire a journalism professor they believed would work counter to those goals. “While it is wonderful for a successful Aggie to want to come back to Texas A&M to be a tenured professor and build something this important from scratch, we must look at her résumé and her statements made in opinion pieces and public interviews,” regent Mike Hernandez wrote to Banks and system Chancellor John Sharp, expressing disappointment that the board learned of the hire after it had been announced.

“The New York Times is one of the leading mainstream media sources in our country. It is common knowledge that they are biased and progressive-leaning. The same exact thing can be said about the University of Texas,” he continued. McElroy, a 1981 TAMU graduate, has studied news media and race, with a focus on how to improve diversity and inclusion in newsrooms.

TAMU's attempt to recruit her came as lawmakers were debating a bill that bans diversity, equity, and inclusion offices, programs, and training at publicly funded universities. The bill is set to go into effect on January 1, 2024.

McElroy stated that her appointment was caught up in "DEI hysteria" as Texas university leaders try to figure out what type of work involving race is allowed under the new law. She told the Texas Tribune she felt judged for her race and gender and said an A&M administrator told her that her hire has raised concerns within the system because "you're a Black woman who worked at The New York Times."

Two days after McElroy's June 13 signing ceremony, the conservative website Texas Scorecard published an article painting her as a "Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion proponent." The university received phone calls from the Rudder Association and former students raising concerns about the hire. Banks also said she received calls from six to seven members of the Board of Regents asking questions.

The TAMU system's general counsel reported it could not find evidence that race and gender were a factor in the fumbled attempt to recruit McElroy, but the university also publicly acknowledged that it would pay a \$1 million settlement to McElroy, who is remaining in her tenured role at UT-Austin.

A review of the failed hiring revealed actions by former university President M. Katherine Banks. The internal report showed that Banks was heavily involved in behind-the-scenes discussions to walk back the original offer to McElroy, contradicting Banks' public statements that she had no knowledge of changes to the offer. The report is the latest revelation as TAMU administrators grapple with employment scandals that have rocked the Aggie community this summer and raised questions about the level of outside interference in

university-level decisions that led to multiple resignations, including Banks.

Text messages and emails included in the report reveal that many members of the Board of Regents had concerns with McElroy's prior experience, which they viewed as counter to the vision they had for the new journalism program and the university writ large.

After the Faculty Senate meeting, Hart Blanton, the communications and journalism department head involved in the failed effort to recruit McElroy, said that Banks interfered in the hiring process and that race was a factor in university officials' decision to water down McElroy's job offer. "To the contrary, President Banks injected herself into the process atypically and early on," Blanton said.

The system also released details of an internal review of how respected opioids expert Joy Alonzo was suspended after she was accused of criticizing Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in a lecture. Texas and Wyoming find common ground in politicians' meddling in education.