



Department of History

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Dear Anastasia,

It is with deep regret that I hereby tender my resignation as associate professor of history at the University of Kentucky, effective January 1, 2024. This is one of the most difficult letters I've ever written, because I don't want to resign. And although I would rather not dwell on the past, I feel I owe it to myself to go on record about my reasons for giving up this career, for which I have worked so long and hard. My apologies in advance for the length.

Two causes prompt my resignation: Discriminatory behavior towards me and the corporatization of the institution, along with the moral hazards it creates for faculty. At times, these were interrelated.

I have always known that I would be a teacher, which is why I got my PhD. Following in my father's footsteps, over my 25-year career, I have never spared any effort to be the best instructor that I could be and to help students as much as they needed or wanted to do well in my classes and in life. As the University has admitted increasing numbers of students who cannot manage college-level work, I have spent more time with them individually outside of class, frequently on the weekends, to remediate them. Although I have been honored to mentor exceedingly bright students who have gone on to illustrious careers in academia, law, and medicine, more rewarding has been to raise a C or D student to a B. Never have I failed a student who put forth a reasonable effort.

And I have demonstrated love for my students in numerous other ways, large and small, in and out of class. For example, when a single mother had no child care, I encouraged her to bring her daughter to class and provided toys. I have worked with students many months beyond the semester to finish incompletes. I have given them unique opportunities to intern on my nationally known documentary editing project, training them with marketable skills. I just hired a UK alumna in a position paying \$50,000/year plus benefits. I took into my home a former student who was a struggling single mother, providing her and her 10-year old son rent-free lodging while she sorted out her life. And I acted as the guardian for her boy while she completed basic training out of state for the National Guard.

I know other members of our department care as much as I do. But I also know that some students tell me I am the only instructor they have who pays any attention to their education. Every semester several students tell me I am the best and most dedicated instructor they have had at UK. Even those who did not necessarily prefer my teaching style report that they learned and achieved more in my courses than they thought possible.

Yet our colleagues have painted me relentlessly as overly demanding, harsh, and callous about the well-being of students. Since my first semester at UK in 2007, there has been a steady campaign that can only be termed harassment, intended to force me to conform to preconceived ideas of how a young, female professor ought to teach. The double standard between expectations of me and those of our senior male colleagues is shocking in its blatant sexism. The behavior of some of our colleagues towards me was

uncollegial, unprofessional, and even illegal. I have been lied to, lied about, pressured, and threatened by those who should have supported and valued me.

I needn't tell you that there is plenty of research showing that students favor white, cis-gender, male instructors. Those, especially women, who do not fit gender stereotypes receive lower evaluations scores and more student complaints than their male or traditionally feminine counterparts. It's clear that many of our colleagues are no more enlightened than our students in this regard and can't understand a faculty member who appears traditionally feminine while teaching in a traditionally male field and in a typically male style. Because of my appearance as female, they believe I should be nurturing in a traditionally maternal way or forced to conform. Even Phil Harling, who, as chair, seemed genuinely interested in supporting me, repeated the false narrative that my expectations of students are so high as to be unattainable. How can this be when the average grade in my courses is a B?

In my first semester, then-DGS Kathi Kern pressured me to raise grades in my graduate seminar. She told me it was unacceptable that 4 of 15 students received Cs. After I raised three of the grades to Bs, one student, a middle-aged guy, expressed that he was glad that he could now move on to his quals with confidence. He took and failed them. Then he doubled down to study harder and retake them. As he was stressing himself with this fruitless endeavor, he died of a heart attack. I always think that if he had gotten the grade he earned, he might still be alive.

Even then it was clear that the History Department's policy of admitting anyone to the graduate program who would write a check was faltering, and within a few years, it became much more selective. But in the meantime, I became a scapegoat for the program's problems. Our colleagues blamed me for driving students out of the program when those students left for personal reasons. Dan Smith threatened to remove me from a dissertation committee when I expressed concern about the quality of the work, while Dave Bowman conspired with my advisee to help her avoid the archival work I required of her. Even as they voted repeatedly not to hire another early Americanist, they blamed me (on my FMER) for the demise of the early American graduate program—as though a junior faculty member could carry a whole program by herself! At the undergraduate level, I was likewise blamed (again, on my FMER) for failing a student when one or two of our male colleagues failed the *same* student.

Most tellingly, during the executive meeting about my tenure case, two female colleagues mentioned my clothing as a problem. They objected to my vintage attire, complaining that my wardrobe was “not average.” Two other colleagues pointed out the illegality of this line of critique. Although the discussion stopped, the discrimination did not.

After this meeting and shortly before I received tenure, then-Chair Francie Chassen-Lopez and then-DGS David Hamilton called me into a meeting where they admonished me for 90 minutes about my teaching. They demanded that I do four things: I should “be less intense,” “be less intimidating,” “give fewer comments on papers,” and “give the students what they expect.”

Yet our male colleagues, including Bruce Holle, Ron Formisano, Jeremy Popkin, Eric Christianson, Mark Summers, and Erik Myrup, behaved in ways that—at best—challenged students and—at worst—were abusive. Drs. Summer and Myrup, for example, are known to give copious comments on student papers, and my exams are embarrassingly easy compared Dr. Summers's. But while they teach unimpeded, administration has attempted to interfere with and monitor my teaching and sometimes prohibited me from teaching 100-level courses.

Other senior men in the department have demonstrated very troubling behavior with no repercussions. As beloved as Dr. Holle was by many students, some despised him and refused to take his classes because he yelled at them, called them names, and cultivated a boys' club atmosphere that alienated female students.

His well-known joke was that his name meant “hell” in German, and that’s what his classes would be like for students. Some students and one colleague reported that he attended class drunk. Yet he was celebrated by this department. Dr. Formisano frequently berated students with vulgar language. Dr. Popkin wrote nasty comments on papers (“Is English your first language?”). Eric Christianson once told a female student that her thesis was good “for a girl.” But even *if* students complained—which is doubtful—no action was ever taken that I am aware of. Students did complain about a certain full professor who had a long history of sexually harassing female students. But was he ever disciplined?

I have never engaged in any behavior even remotely like this. And when I raised some of these points in my own defense, the response was either, “Well, that’s just Ron.” Or, “You can’t believe everything students say.” Exactly. I couldn’t agree more.

But my colleagues rarely gave me the benefit of the doubt or dealt with me in a professional manner. They never said, “Well, that’s just Jane.” And only once did a(n interim) chair, Tracy Campbell, ever approach me to get my side of the story when a student complained. (He then supported me. Later, when then-Chair Karen Petrone used these same complaints against me, then-Dean of Faculty Ted Schatski found them to be without merit.) Instead, they believed the worst about me, whispered behind my back, and worked to undermine my relationships with my students.

There are numerous examples, but I will give only two of the most egregious.

First, when I inherited a graduate advisee—someone who had already spent 10 unproductive years in the program—who was struggling to write anything on her dissertation, then-DGS Dr. Hamilton told her to drop me as her advisor but not to inform me. I only learned this when Tina inadvertently copied me on a message regarding the student retaking her quals. Then Joanne Melish wrote her dissertation for her, allowing this incompetent student to obtain her PhD and then a position at BCTC.

Second, when Karen Petrone was chair, a student, disgruntled that he did poorly on his papers when he refused to revise them, lodged a complaint against me. Without consulting either my syllabus or me, Dr. Petrone *emailed my entire class to invite them to complain about me more*. Later, at my insistence, she apologized to me in front of the class. But the damage was done, as the course evaluations made clear.

You saw the double standard for yourself this past semester when Mark Summers was allowed to refuse to teach a course with a student who threatened him, but Dean Ana Franco-Watkins told me that I couldn’t “just refuse to teach a course because of a *perception*.” As though it was only in my head that this student was a threat! You also saw how the administration, after bungling the listing of my course, tormented me for the entire semester, demanding a review of my syllabus (which I had been using successfully for 15 years) and that my teaching be observed, as though I were a junior faculty member. And based on what? Alleged complaints they refused to divulge?<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps merely a “perception” that I was unreasonably demanding. I appreciated the support you and Erik Myrup offered me during that very stressful time. That and some amazing students were the only redeeming features of my final semester at UK.

Neither has my research been recognized while at UK. Despite the fact I have one of the most ambitious and successful research agendas in the department, and I have raised millions for my award-winning work, I have gotten virtually no support or acknowledgement from this institution or the department. According to former Dean of Research Betty Lorch, for a time, my large federal grants provided the entire History faculty with research funds. But last I checked, I was one of the lowest paid associate members of the department, while others with thinner CVs make six figures. When I requested pay equity, Dr. Petrone

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<sup>1</sup> These days, more progressive institutions refuse to accept student complaints that are unsigned. Nor do they use anonymous course evaluations for promotion and tenure.

passed along word from then-Dean Kornbluh (a historian whose own scholarship was so poor that he was denied tenure by his department), that I would not get pay equity until I “improved” my teaching. Of course, Dr. Petrone could not specify what I was supposedly doing wrong: “But you *must* be doing *something!*” she insisted. Since Kornbluh had told our department that we should “just find a way to pass students with a C,” it was clear what “improvement” meant.

The behavior of the dominant faction of the department towards me can only be termed “mobbing.” The toxicity has taken a terrible toll on my physical and mental health. In 2015, I suffered a complete physical breakdown, which left me with chronic health problems.

Many times I reached out for help—to deans, the Provost’s Office, the Title IV office, and others. Only twice did anyone take me seriously. I mentioned that Ted Schatski affirmed that the student complaints were baseless. And earlier, when I went to him about the lies Dr. Chassen-Lopez had written in my FMER, knowing her profanity-laced tirades against junior faculty members, he advised me to avoid future interactions with her. Otherwise, I was disbelieved and gaslit. Astoundingly, in response to my request for pay equity, G.T. Lineberry in the Office of Faculty Advancement suggested that I simply work less. After all, he reasoned, I had tenure.

In this atmosphere, the incessant talk of diversity, equity, and inclusion is especially noxious. The dominant faction never accepted me as I am, treated me equally, or gave any indication that they valued my opinion or well-being. Dr. Petrone told me repeatedly that I am an “outlier.” What she meant was “outcast,” and the only way I would be accepted was to conform. Gender discrimination was one cause of the mistreatment; but I also suspect that, because I work on political history and a dead white guy, some of our colleagues think I am a Conservative. They couldn’t be more wrong. But if I were, that would be no cause to ostracize me.

It’s clear that a significant motivation to force my conformity is money. UK administration cares only about justifying their obscenely bloated salaries, not about educating the people of Kentucky. Insofar as members of the History Department do the bidding of the corrupt administration, they are complicit in the fraud. Dr. Petrone’s own words are the most revelatory. In urging us to accept students on our waitlists for classes, she said, “Just imagine the students are little piles of money, waiting to be scooped up.” She also conveyed yet another gem from Dean Kornbluh, namely, that we should view our students as revenue streams, selling them course materials to fund our research trips. I can hardly imagine a more unethical approach to students.

Yet for all the money-grubbing behavior of UK administration, the unprecedented funds I brought in did not protect me. On the contrary, I became more of a target. While on sabbatical in 2020, I had brought in \$360,000 from the State of Delaware and the NEH to write the Dickinson biography. When Delaware reneged on their agreement to grant me an extension to finish the biography and began making extra-contractual demands of me, I turned to OSPA for help, thinking they would stand behind me and enforce the contract. But instead, they sided with Delaware and tried to bully me into conceding to the demands. The assistant director of OSPA, Honey Elder, disparaged me in threatening terms and claimed that I would bring disrepute on UK if I did not concede. Phil Harling, then chair, tried to mediate, which I very much appreciated. But I ended up having to hire a lawyer to defend me from both Delaware *and* UK. Once he sent a letter, they both backed down and left me alone. That traumatic experience made it perfectly clear that UK doesn’t care at all about me as a person or respect me as a scholar.

But my achievements over the past 16 years deserve respect. When I came to UK, I was relatively unknown. Now I am recognized as one of the leading scholars of the American Founding. Giants in the field including Gordon Wood, Jack Greene, Peter Onuf, Jack Rakove, Akhil Reed Amar, and the late Gary Nash and Richard Bernstein defer(ed) to me on John Dickinson and Quakerism. I am one of the few women in this field. I’d wager that I have raised more money for my work in this brief time than any member of the A&S

faculty ever did. Where six or seven men tried and failed to publish Dickinson's writings, I have already produced two award-winning volumes and have a third and fourth in the works. My scholarship is literally creating a new field of study, and I create jobs for other scholars that pay them and earn them promotion at their institutions. My Paine volume has garnered excellent reviews, and my biography of Dickinson will be groundbreaking for both scholars and the public. I would also guess that I already have had more invited public speaking engagements than any other member of the department. My work against the expansion of the Second Amendment was cited by the Supreme Court, and my name is on another brief that the SCOTUS consulted in the historic *Moore v. Harper* (2023) decision. I hate that I have been reduced to singing my own praises.

I am thankful for the colleagues, including you, who did support me over the years. They let me know that they appreciated what I had to offer the students, the department, and the profession. They saw how our colleagues behaved towards me and condemned it. I am also thankful for the many students who likewise saw this treatment and offered me their encouragement and support.

It breaks my heart that I may never set foot in a classroom again. I will miss the students and my colleagues. But it's finally time for me to choose my personal and professional well-being over this corrupt institution and its pretended care for students and faculty.

Sincerely,



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The John Dickinson Writings Project

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