



Ohio Professor Scores \$400,000 Settlement in Free-speech Victory

Shawnee State University in Ohio has agreed to pay \$400,000 in damages and attorney fees to a professor after threatening him with suspension or termination if he refused to acknowledge students by their preferred pronouns, marking a significant free-speech victory.

Philosophy professor Nicholas Meriwether received a written warning after a January 2018 incident in which he addressed a male student as “sir,” *The Epoch Times* [reported](#). The student approached Meriwether after class and said he identified as a woman and demanded that Meriwether address him with feminine titles and pronouns.

Meriwether countered by stating he would simply refer to the student by his first or last name only, even a chosen name, but the dissatisfied student filed numerous complaints with the university.

“His chosen name, though not his birth name, is feminine, and I was willing to call him this, since using a person’s proper name doesn’t imply anything about what one believes or what is true,” Meriwether later explained in an [opinion piece](#) for *The Hill*, in which he expertly railed against leftist orthodoxy and the identity politics that has gripped college campuses and dehumanized anyone who identifies as a conservative or Christian.

“What I cannot do, however, is to speak in such a way that implies that a man is a woman or a woman a man. In other words, to refer to a student in such a way that I imply something that is not true, that I know to be false, to effectively lie, and so violate my conscience as a philosopher and as a Christian,” Meriwether elaborated.

Following a formal investigation into allegations that Meriwether “created a hostile environment” for the student, Shawnee State officials then told Meriwether that continual refusal to acknowledge the student’s preferred pronouns would result in his suspension or termination.

Meriwether sought representation by the legal group Alliance Defending Freedom and sued the university for First and 14th Amendment violations.

“This case forced us to defend what used to be a common belief — that nobody should be forced to contradict their core beliefs just to keep their job,” ADF Senior Counsel Travis Barham said in a statement. “Dr. Meriwether went out of his way to accommodate his students and treat them all with dignity and respect, yet his university punished him because he wouldn’t endorse an ideology that he believes is false.



Andrey Maximenko/iStock/Getty Images Plus



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on April 15, 2022

While a district court initially dismissed the case, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit overturned the dismissal and acknowledged the professor's legitimate free-speech claims.

"[Shawnee State University] punished a professor for his speech on a hotly contested issue. And it did so despite the constitutional protections afforded by the First Amendment," a panel of three circuit judges wrote in their [unanimous opinion](#). "The district court dismissed the professor's free-speech and free-exercise claims. We see things differently and reverse."

"If professors lacked free-speech protections when teaching," the opinion elaborated, "a university would wield alarming power to compel ideological conformity. A university president could require a pacifist to declare that war is just, a civil rights icon to condemn the Freedom Riders, a believer to deny the existence of God, or a Soviet émigré to address his students as 'comrades.' That cannot be."

Rather than bringing the case to the U.S. Supreme Court and engage in a lengthy legal battle, Shawnee State University decided to settle, agreeing to pay Meriwether \$400,000.

"We're pleased to see the university recognize that the First Amendment guarantees Dr. Meriwether — and every other American — the right to speak and act in a manner consistent with one's faith and convictions," Barham said.

In addition to the settlement, the university rescinded the written warning it issued in 2018 and affirmed Meriwether's right to address his students in a manner that is consistent with his beliefs, the ADF wrote on its webpage.

The Center for Christian Virtue applauded the conclusion of the case as a significant victory for both free speech and academic freedom.

"Shawnee State, a university funded by Ohio taxpayers, not only violated the First Amendment, but violated the fundamental ideals of academic freedom. Universities should be a place of robust debate, yet Shawnee State decided to punish a state employee and professor for refusing to lie to a student," said Aaron Baer, President of Center for Christian Virtue, an ally of Alliance Defending Freedom.

"Professor Meriwether and Alliance Defending Freedom have done a tremendous service to our country. They have demonstrated the impact we can have when we are not bullied into silence by the government or the woke mob," he continued.

Baer is hopeful the case will prompt others to stand against the liberal tyranny that has pervaded college campuses and corporations such as Disney.

"Christians across our country should take heart and be encouraged to stand up for what we know is true, and not be pressured into silence," he opined.



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