

A Sample of Statements from Florida Polytechnic University Rally for Students and Faculty Voice; September 5, 2018

Organized by the United Faculty of Florida & Florida Education Association (NEA, AFT, AFL-CIO), Lakeland FL, September 5 2018



United Faculty of Florida

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CHRIS COUGHLIN

My name is Chris Coughlin and I'm an associate professor of engineering here at Florida Poly. Prior to coming here, I spent 25 years in government and industry across a variety of fields ranging from designing materials to absorb underwater sounds to understanding the physics of shaving so we could make a better shaving cream to the engineering of structural and functional materials for naval aircraft.

I left a safe and stable job to come here for the unique opportunity to be a part of the development of a new STEM university, to work together with students, other faculty, and administration to build a place that would be different.

A place that would serve Florida as an incubator for great ideas.

A place that be a collaborative model for STEM education.

But most of all, a place that would serve our students - to give them an education and a voice in that education.

You can ask any of my students, I can almost always relate whatever we talk about in class back to an actual problem that I have worked on in my career. I'm sure it drives them crazy at times, but I also know they love to see what awaits them in the real-world. I see my role as much more than a teacher of concepts, but as a mentor both inside and outside

of the classroom, to show them that what they are learning, however boring it may seem right then, is something that they will need to be not only successful engineers and scientists or whatever they choose to do but to just be successful human beings. That is my mission, that is why I came here and I used to think that was the mission of this university.

But what has evolved seems to be an organization that doesn't collaborate with the stakeholders - students, faculty, and staff.

- » It has become a top-down driven organization that seems to see students as an annoyance and the faculty and staff as interchangeable parts that can be easily replaced.
- » A place where curriculum decisions are made in office suites by administrators who assume they know best.
- » A place where my colleagues have been directed to eliminate the uniqueness in their teaching style in pursuit of some ill-defined homogeneity.
- » A place where faculty and staff are afraid to speak up for themselves and for the students because of a culture of retaliation.
- » A place where I've seen my staff colleagues summarily dismissed and escorted off campus by the police because we are moving in a different direction.

- » A place where I was informed that my contract won't be renewed by email with no information as to why.
- » A place where the university has eliminated the sole on-site counselor for a residential campus.

Florida Poly can do better. I ask you to demand accountability from our administrators and the Board of Trustees. I ask you to show them you care as much as I do about what happens to this university.

Our students deserve better.

No matter what happens to any of us, our students deserve better.

CASEY FOX

George Washington Carver quoted that "Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom."

When I conceptualize education and what it means to me I immediately find myself back in first grade. I would get my work done early and then I'd be busy trying to talk or sing or snap my fingers. Thank goodness Mrs. Jordan pulled me aside, exuding kindness convincing me I was a true helper and that I could use my extra time and energy to go around the classroom and help students that were struggling. A true helper she said. That never left me.

In 10th grade I changed schools and I was really struggling to fit in missing my friends and family. Mr. Zimmerman took me aside and noted that my insight in class and my assignments were a pure joy to read and that he saw greatness in me. Greatness in me he said. That never left me.

In grad school I was surrounded by educators and counselors who not only cared about providing me with the material I needed to be an excellent clinician but what I needed to be the best version of myself. When I lost a friend to suicide my professors were there for me. When I was juggling a full-time job, classes and internships they complimented and encouraged me. When I doubted myself along the way my professors noted that I was excelling in the program and that I was a shining star. A shining star they said. That never left me.

Education is indeed freedom- and it opens doors not just for a job or a career, but it opens the door of a professor or a therapist that can inspire you, believe in you, encourage you and give you strength to keep working hard. Despite the sacrifices, the time commitment and the transitions I cannot look back on my time as a student with anything but respect and gratitude for my educators as well as the institutions.

To read student quotes on the FPU petition noting, "I just want to protect kids from making the same mistake I did in going to a school that really didn't care about them" and "I used to be a student, they treat out of state students like a burden" and "the people they are firing have made my experience here at Poly a memorable one and have helped enormously" I cannot help but feel heartbroken for Florida Polytechnic University students.

In my two years of working at Poly I provided a service with minimum support and resources. I offered guidance, advocacy and unconditional positive regards to students that would arrive in my office. I frequently heard students exclaim they were getting the run around, they didn't trust staff due to the way they were treating students and the miscommunication or lack thereof was frustrating and disappointing. I

sent monthly reports, highlighting student concerns. I also spent the last year begging for help and stating again and again that the number of students I was working with that experienced suicidal ideation demanded more resources and improved mental health literacy. I had BayCare, an adjunct service to what I was providing, and that simply was not enough.

Being a first-generation college student, a freshman, a transfer student, an international student, a minority student, and LGBTQ+ student, a female student, a student with mental health diagnoses or disability and even the "I am almost done here now what" student at Poly all presented challenges that I met with responsiveness, compassion and hope. Students at FPU are worthy of the resources it takes to ensure they are getting services similar to other SUS students. All students deserve a safe space to talk to a helping professional, a relationship that is unlike any other, so that they can endure their struggles, receive validation and be encouraged and challenged to become the best versions of themselves.

In the words of Carl Rogers, "When the other person is hurting, confused, troubled, anxious, alienated, terrified; or when he or she is doubtful of self-worth, uncertain as to identity, then understanding is called for. The gentle and sensitive companionship of an empathic stance... provides illumination and healing. In such situations deep understanding is, I believe, the most precious gift one can give to another."

Thank you.

JOANNE MCCALL

Hello, I am Joanne McCall, President of the Florida Education Association. I am a speech language pathologist and the proud parent of a student at the University of North Florida. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of the faculty and students at Florida Polytechnic.

The FEA is frequently referred to as the "Teachers' Union," so it may surprise some that we represent more than 20,000 higher education faculty at all 12

public state universities, St. Leo University, 12 state colleges and at four university graduate assistant chapters. To my great disappointment, our members on the Florida Poly Tech campus are being confronted with a level of hostility and disrespect that we have not experienced on any other campus.

Our members pride themselves on creating a dynamic learning environment. They are driven to perform at top levels to ensure that our students leave with a degree that is valued by and meaningful to potential employers. What is happening on the Florida Poly Tech campus is alarming, not only from a union leader and educator's perspective, but also a parent's.

You all know that faculty is the heart and soul of our universities. At Florida Poly Tech, they voted overwhelmingly to establish a union on campus. Now, rather than work with the faculty, the administration repeatedly has taken retaliatory action — not only damaging morale of remaining faculty, but undermining the learning environment of the students.

This university could be another gem in Florida's esteemed public system of higher education, but the actions of the administration are a warning to potential faculty and students. It's time the Poly Tech administration changes direction, which may mean a change in leadership. Poly Tech will not achieve the academic status we all want without the support of a faculty that feels secure and respected.

The Florida Education Association joins with the United Faculty of Florida in calling for a thorough independent investigation of the Florida Polytech University administration, and for the rehiring of the faculty and staff who have — without cause — been dismissed or not offered renewal of their contracts.

We want to help this university succeed — for the benefit of everyone who works here and, most important, for the benefit of everyone who learns here.

CHRISTINA DRAKE

My name is Christina Drake and I am an engineering professor here at FL Poly and the prior faculty trustee. I'm here today because of concerns I have about the management of the university and how it is affecting students, faculty and staff.

Higher education means a lot to me. There is the historical significance that 100 years ago, a mixed race minority female getting an advanced degree was so rare, that I often reflect on how far we have come along in society, that I was able to do this even though my family could not afford it. In my family, I am the first in several generations to graduate from college. To have been fortunate enough to get a doctorate in engineering, I count myself as blessed. My ability to get an education has done a lot for me: from economic freedom, to working on cool technologies, and participation in society in a manner I may not have had otherwise without a college education. It is the reason I have met so many interesting and wonderful students and had the opportunity to work with such wonderful colleagues.

As an undergrad, I had to use the mental health counseling services at UF my junior year. This counselor knew about my program and understood the pressure I felt. I also knew several other students who went to the counseling center on campus. It was a known resource that was easy to access on campus.

In both my undergraduate and graduate education, I had wonderful professors that provided wisdom and guidance to me. They took the time to get to know me and invest in my growth as a person. Faculty who care about students as people, and not just "products" or "customers" of a university is important. Higher education and the university experience is about much more than just achieving competency in a subject area. It's about growing students into citizens who care about global and societal implications of their work. Students who care about ethics, about integrity, and strengthening the fiber of communities that they will someday be leaders in.

FL Poly has hit a fork in the road. There is the desire of the university to grow fast, get both regional and ABET accreditation, and do things differently. These are not bad things. What is dangerous is when we exchange items that are vital to the residential campus experience, such as the sole mental health counselor and sole librarian for these. It is dangerous when administration retaliates against faculty and staff who speak up on issues of concern within the university. We cannot say that we meet the our regional accreditation's requirement for integrity, or that we care about ABET's concern for ethics when we treat students, faculty and staff as if they are fungible human capital.

The consequences of that mindset is dangerous in an academic setting. We lost a young man this summer and are left to wonder if that could have gone differently. I've recently heard of sexual assault that was reported to the university and dealt with dismissively. In one case, the student was so traumatized by the lack of concern from the university regarding her assault that she left the school. We have a university president that characterizes our students as immature, and uses a derogatory reference to describe a group of students speaking up about their concerns. A Provost who has no problem yelling and growling at staff and faculty, particularly females, for being disrespectful. These are not administrators who appear to care about the well being of people.

Universities do not exist for administrators. I fear that our board of trustees and board of governors have forgotten that by their lack of action. Our goal is education. One cannot care about education if you do not care about the students matriculating at your institution or the people who are on the front lines of delivering that education and tending to student well being. Even if they are outspoken about concerns that they have. I urge everyone today to request accountability at FL Poly and demand that it behave as a public institution that requires its administrators to recognize their first obligation is as public servants. We have lost that. I hope the public will continue to stand with us to make Poly an institution worthy of being in the state university system.

RHEA MCKINNEY

Chairman Wilson, members of the Board of Trustees; I am Rhea McKinney Secretary for Florida Education Association Retired, President of Polk Education Association retired and former chief negotiator for PEA with the Polk County Schools' administration. I am here today in support of my brother and sister members of the United Faculty of Florida.

The Florida Constitution, Article 1, Section 6, states in part: "The right of employees, by and through a labor organization, to bargain collectively shall not be denied or abridged." The National Labor Relations Board gives an example of abridgment on their web site as "Transferring, laying off, terminating, assigning more difficult tasks, or otherwise punishing employees because they engage in union or protected concerted activity." It appears, through recent action of FPU administration that the rights of local union members have been retaliated against and is being abridged through the dismissal of positively evaluated employees who simply exercised their rights to speak out about working conditions and student concerns. Further, half of the legitimate UFF bargaining team have been dismissed from their faculty positions and recent scheduled bargaining sessions have been canceled.

In no way do I seek to school this Board and its chair in labor law, rather I simply bring the matters before you as a reminder of that which required and Just. Therefore, I am asking this Board and its chair to give wise council to University administrators on the need for fair, just, and honest treatment of UFF members, other staff, and the students.

I leave you with some words of wisdom from past US Presidents. President Eisenhower opined that "only a fool would try to deprive working men and women of the right to join the union of their choice." And President Reagan called union membership "one of the most elemental human rights."

Thank you.

MARSHALL OGLETREE

My name is Marshall Ogletree and I am the Executive Director of the United Faculty of Florida, an affiliate of FEA, NEA, and AFT. We represent over 20,000 faculty and graduate assistants at all 12 public universities 12 colleges, and at St. Leo University

I have been a high school mathematics teacher and a union staff person for a total of 48 years, 37 in union staff work. I have been in a variety of situations during that time. But never in that time have I witnessed such callous disregard for faculty, their rights to unionize and collectively bargain as provided under Article 1, Section 6, of Florida's Constitution and Chapter 447, Florida Statutes.

I know this Board may not be particularly enamored by unions but that is only part of the point. The university leadership fought the union since day one. We won the election 38-6 yet the administration began a slow deliberate process in negotiations while taking action against highly skilled and talented professors who were speaking for the faculty and, I might add, student concerns.

Remarks made by President Avent in the media have been callous towards students and dismissive and patronizing towards faculty. "Culture" quizzes and required compliance to the company line do not make educational excellence. Actions against union leaders and negotiation team members are unparalleled in my vast years of experience. The

environment is toxic and clearly mean spirited in its nature!

I want you to know that UFF will stand behind our membership and fight to reinstate our union members who have done nothing wrong other than exercising their union rights and free speech. We will push for an independent investigation of all actions by the administration since the union election in 2016. In the end we support appropriate actions against President Avent and the Provost up to their dismissal. We have a growing number of ULPs, a lawsuit, and who knows what else. We have state and national affiliate support in this cause and we ask that you promptly take such actions to put FPU back on the path to success with new leadership at the top.

SAMPLE OF EMAILS TO CHANCELLOR MARSHALL CRISER

From: Mark Piotrowski
[mailto:mark@10thumbs.org]
Sent: Monday, Sept. 3, 2018 9:08 PM
To: Chancellor@fbog.edu
Subject: Very upset at Florida Polytechnic's treatment of faculty

Dear Chancellor Marshall Criser,

I'm a Florida native and my family has had a long connection to the Florida public college and university system — of which we are all proud.

My father taught more than 25 years at the University of Florida in the College of Engineering. I am a graduate of both the University of Florida and Santa Fe College, while my brother holds degrees from both New College and the University of Florida.

You can imagine then that it was with great dismay that I read about Florida Polytechnic's treatment of faculty, including the cutting of the mental health staff and the abhorrent attempts to bust up the faculty union.

My parents were both proud union educators and their dedication and hard work not only paved the way for my brother and I to earn multiple degrees — but touched hundreds of students' lives throughout their careers.

That very same opportunity should be given to the hard-working women and men at Florida Polytechnic. They should be given the time, resources and freedom to unlock their students' full potential — without harassment or reprisals from the FPU administration for working collectively.

I trust that you and the rest of the Board of Governors will intercede and stop these actions by the Florida Polytechnic administration — actions that bring shame to all of us who have proudly attended and taught at Florida's public institutions of higher learning.

Sincerely,
Mark Piotrowski
Tallahassee, FL

**On Aug 20, 2018, at 2:36 PM,
(REDACTED FOR PRIVACY) wrote:**

Hello Mr Criser,

I am a current PhD student of the University of South Florida, and recently heard the following news; https://www.tampabay.com/news/education/k12/At-Florida-Poly-a-student-suicide-and-a-question-Could-it-have-been-prevented-_170583324

I believe that the pressure, and stress in the higher education system of the USA is such that no school should be allowed to operate without a required minimum of mental health counselor.

Without the mental health support (e.g.: counseling center) offered by the University of South Florida I may not be here myself. I would like to stress again the fact that studying in the US can be really challenging and support should be available if needed.

I hope my emails does not end in closed heard and that you will take in account my feedback upon this tragedy.

I would personally recommend to establish some sort of policy requiring a minimum of counselor depending on the amount of students.

It is your responsibility to react and prevent future similar tragedy. I hope you will understand the situation and take action.

Note: due to the personal content of this email please do not distribute. If you wish to forward my email please anonymize it.

Best regards,
(REDACTED FOR PRIVACY)

Chancellor Marshall Criser,

We write to express our strong disapproval of the events occurring at Florida Polytechnic University. We find the complete lack of adequate mental health services available to students, in addition to the university's broader attempts to suppress faculty and staff concerns about student safety and welfare, to be abhorrent, unjustifiable, and unacceptable.

First, Florida Polytechnic has deprived its students of critical emotional support and wellbeing by firing the only on-campus mental health counselor. Implementing a telephone hotline and a few hours of counselor visits per week is not an acceptable substitute and this decision shortly reaped a predictable consequence - one student has already committed suicide. We write to implore you that the remaining student body should not be bereft of necessary mental health access and support. Many

students need adequate mental health services to succeed in a high-stress environment like the isolated residential campus of Florida Polytechnic, and for some, these services make the difference between life and death. The university's students deserve a full staff of on-campus mental health counselors and should not be afforded anything less.

We also protest the Florida Polytechnic administration's attempts to silence faculty and staff by firing those who voiced opposition to university actions. When the university disregarded its students' mental and physical health by removing the only on-campus mental health counselor, alert faculty and staff members had the courage to speak for their students and colleagues. However, although they provided vital warnings about threats to student safety, these concerns were considered a nuisance by the administration and they were punished for speaking out. Academic

freedom of expression always benefits the academic rigor and health of any university, and Florida Polytechnic's current actions show a culture and climate of oppression and fear.

To demonstrate that Florida's university system indeed values the integrity of its faculty and staff members, the health of their workplace, and student safety, we strongly request that you a) hire a full staff of on-campus mental health counselors, and b) enforce due process for Florida Polytechnic faculty and staff members who advocated for their colleagues and students, and do not allow the university to fire them as retaliation for their commitment to higher education.

Respectfully,

Graduate Assistants United
University of South Florida
United Faculty of Florida