

Northwestern | ORGANIZATION OF WOMEN FACULTY

OWF Statement Regarding the Cheer Team and the Appointment and Resignation of Mike Polisky as Athletic Director

May 13, 2021

This statement was prepared before the Athletic Director's resignation. It remains valid despite the resignation which, while welcome, does not erase the failure of leadership and oversight processes that led our University to this point.

Northwestern's Organization of Women Faculty urges the University's leaders to make it a top priority to root out and address sexist and racist harassment and discrimination wherever they occur within our University community. The University's response to recent events and allegations regarding the cheer team is deeply problematic, illustrating the power dynamics that perpetuate sexist and racist harassment and contribute to a toxic climate for women faculty, staff, and students and members of minoritized groups. It was unacceptable that the appointment of the Athletic Director was made while a sexual harassment lawsuit and investigation against the appointee were pending, and given the sexist and racist practices which led to the firing of the former cheer coach.

These events all reinforce the conclusions of a 2018 study, undertaken by the Provost's Advisory Committee for Women Faculty, in which women faculty reported that their complaints and concerns about harassment and discrimination at Northwestern had not been taken seriously by university leadership. Such disregard has a spillover effect that makes women feel disrespected and even unsafe.

We thank the faculty who have spoken up effectively with our students and we join the Faculty Senate which on March 10 2021 demanded a comprehensive, swift, and transparent review of what occurred, as well as an accounting of the reforms that have been taken to assure that University leaders give necessary attention and respect to any future complaints. Transparent accounting is critical to Northwestern being able to move on from this series of incidents. We call on the administration to put in place an oversight structure that identifies and genuinely addresses concerns of athletes, especially women and Black athletes. There needs to be checks that are independent of the office of the Athletic Director. Requirements that students interact with alumni at pre- and post-game events should also be reviewed, with student safety and respect as the highest priority. These changes need to be openly conveyed, explained and discussed with stakeholders.

The University must meet its legal obligations to its student athletes and all women and people of color at Northwestern. But simply meeting the law alone is not ethical leadership. We call upon the administration to live up to its stated goals of inclusion and equity and to set and maintain high standards in the treatment of women and individuals of color on campus that do justice to the University's stated commitment to excellence.

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Professor of Sociology and Board of Lady Managers of the Columbian Exposition Chair, WCAS

Ursula Porod

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