

November 2, 2012

President Benjamin Allen  
University of Northern Iowa  
1227 West 27<sup>th</sup> St.  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614

Dear President Allen,

I am writing to express my grave concern over the manner in which you responded to a grievance filed by James Roethler, a freshman psychology major, against Cathy Desoto, a Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Northern Iowa. Before the grievance was adjudicated and the facts in the case were established, and without the courtesy of contacting Professor DeSoto, you issued a highly prejudicial and inflammatory press statement. In this statement you were quoted as saying you “strongly disagree(s) with the decision made by the professor in this case.” You went on to say, “We have been working with the student involved from the beginning, and continue to work with him to help ensure that he won’t be penalized for serving his country...”

As the University’s own procedures later established, Professor DeSoto neither altered Mr. Roethler’s grade nor took any other action that was either harmful to Mr. Roethler or in violation of University policies. According to published accounts the grievance was resolved to the complete satisfaction of all parties directly involved in this incident. In fact, Mr. Roethler told the *Northern Iowan* that Desoto handled the situation “very professionally.” He told the newspaper that nothing about the grievance process seemed to affect him negatively in class and that DeSoto didn’t “take it to a personal level at all.” Mr. Roethler’s principal concern was your University’s lack of a policy permitting students to make up work when they are absent due to required military service. As Mr. Roethler stated, “I did not like how [media outlets] focused on DeSoto and not the policy change.”

The media response, which unfairly and falsely characterized Professor DeSoto’s actions, was a direct result of your premature and provocative press release. As a consequence of your actions, Professor DeSoto and members of her family received numerous threatening emails and phone calls. As the *Northern Iowan* reported:

According to DeSoto, the press coverage has harmed not only her personally, but her “profession, UNI as a whole and the morale of persons in the military. People have written me as a result of Ben Allen’s press release and the media stories saying I gave a student a zero because he was in the military,” DeSoto said. “They said I am one of many elitist military haters who teach liberal propaganda and that I should be fired, die or suffer for being a spoiled, liberal professor b----.” DeSoto commented that her husband had received emails saying he’d better get his wife out of town, in addition to the threats she has received.

Just this morning it was reported to me that Professor DeSoto's car was vandalized. As Mr. Roethler himself told the media, "She has received multiple threats, she has to be escorted by armed guards and that's not what I wanted when I filed this grievance."

As I am sure you will recall, last spring the AAUP initiated an investigation of UNI, prompted by your administration's efforts to terminate faculty members, efforts that Professor DeSoto publicly criticized and resisted. Your actions in this matter appear to be retaliatory. As Professor DeSoto noted, citing her past work forcing cleanup of asbestos and lead paint, fighting and winning severance for a faculty member unjustly terminated, and giving testimony to the Government Oversight Committee, "I am well known as an outspoken critic of UNI administration... This feels like retaliation for my activism and outspoken criticism of his administration."

In light of the above, I fear that your rash action in condemning Professor DeSoto and your failure to retract your public statements once the full story had been established have not only endangered Professor DeSoto personally, but have had a chilling effect on academic freedom and free expression at UNI generally. A principal tenet of academic freedom is the faculty's right to independently evaluate student performance within the context of policies and procedures established through a process of shared governance. Your unfortunate decision to ignore your University's own procedures and pass judgment in the press has made a mockery of due process at UNI.

I call upon you to issue a public retraction of your initial statement and employ the University's public relations staff to restore Professor DeSoto's good name and UNI's reputation. Moreover, since it was your reckless disregard of University procedure that led to Professor DeSoto's car being vandalized, I call upon you to personally reimburse her for the damages to her vehicle.

Finally, I want you to know that I hold you personally responsible for the safety of Professor DeSoto and her family.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Rudy Fichtenbaum". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rudy Fichtenbaum  
President, AAUP

cc: Professor Cathy DeSoto  
Professor Daniel Power, President, United Faculty of the University of Northern Iowa  
Kari Braumann, Executive Editor, *Northern Iowan*  
Nadia Crow, News Department, KCRG-TV9  
Nadia Crow, *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*  
News Department, Des Moines Register