

November 22, 2021

Dear President Hemphill, Vice President Foster, Dean Leib, and Dr. Danner—

As researchers and clinicians in the fields of sexual abuse prevention, mental health, human sexuality, and criminology, we affirm both our strong stance against the abuse of children and other vulnerable people, and our strong support for Professor Allyn Walker, their important and ground-breaking research, and their freedom as an academic to explore topics that may spur controversy or discomfort. We can appreciate the need for ODU to respond to concerns from the public and campus community. At the same time, the public backlash reflects a misunderstanding and mischaracterization of Walker's research. Our mission as academics is to counteract such misconceptions that hinder societal understanding of complex issues.

We are strongly committed to creating a world without child sexual abuse. In order to accomplish this daunting goal both ethically and effectively, it is essential to have a complete understanding of the issue, and this requires dissemination of research findings even when they contradict popular assumptions. Important social issues cannot be addressed effectively when such findings are suppressed. For example, researchers such as Dr. Walker emphasize the distinction between attraction to children and sexual abuse of children. Not everyone who is attracted to children abuses children, and not everyone who abuses children is sexually attracted to children. Though these statements may be confusing or controversial to the public due to the conflation of attraction and abuse in public discourse, they are borne out in the literature and widely supported by the community of scientists who have dedicated their lives and careers to the work of child sexual abuse prevention.

We believe it is also essential to understand that people who are attracted to children usually realize they have such attractions when they are children themselves, often as young as 12 or 13. This realization can lead to severe anxiety, depression, social isolation, and suicidal ideation and behavior. We affirm the value and dignity of all children and youth, including those who are attracted to younger children. Any concern for the protection of children must include concern for the welfare of these youth in light of the extreme stigma and abusive attitudes they face from society. Therefore, we affirm the value of Dr. Walker's research in addressing unmet mental health needs which youth and adults attracted to children often have.

Dr. Walker, and others who do this work, are simply advocating for compassionate responses to people who are living with an attraction to children they did not choose and cannot change. Such compassionate responses should not be seen as an affront to prevention efforts; rather, they strengthen prevention efforts by removing barriers to help-seeking and promoting protective factors that we know reduce people's risk of sexual offending (e.g. social connectedness, emotional health). It is widely recognized in prevention science that severely stigmatizing people with addictions or other mental health issues which could contribute to emotional or physical abuse of children is counterproductive because it interferes with their ability to receive help. Similarly, it is possible to condemn sexual abuse of children while acknowledging the harmful and counterproductive effects of the deeply ingrained misconceptions about people who are attracted to children.

De-stigmatization essentially involves increasing the public's understanding about the population being considered. Regarding those attracted to children, as we've seen evidenced countless times over the last few days, the word "pedophile" is misused and misunderstood in public discourse as a synonym for "someone who sexually abuses children." This pervasive misconception, including the ways in which it hinders prevention efforts, is exactly what Dr. Walker's research addresses.

We urge you to consider the dire ramifications for academic freedom that would stem from setting the precedent of removing a professor from their position because the topic of their research is emotionally charged, uncomfortable to discuss, and difficult to understand. It is crucial that universities educate their communities regarding the important role of academic freedom in promoting informed policies addressing serious social issues, that they take a clear stand against the suppression or misrepresentation of such findings, and that they take action against those who disrupt educational and research aims by threatening violence toward scholars.

Dr. Walker has been explicitly clear about their position that child sexual abuse is unacceptable and inexcusable. Given that we all share the same goal of preventing abuse, we respectfully urge you to support Dr. Walker's right to conduct research free from threats and harassment and reinstate them to their position of Assistant Professor, taking whatever actions are necessary to protect their safety and the safety of campus students and faculty. This would demonstrate ODU's commitment to both the prevention of child sexual abuse and to the academic freedom that is a vital tenet of any progressive society.

Sincerely,

Nadav Antebi-Gruszka, Ph.D., LMHC, Columbia University

Fred S. Berlin, M.D., Ph.D., The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

Denise Cabral Carlos de Oliveira, Psychologist, Ph.D. student, Instituto de Medicina Social, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

Maia Christopher, Executive Director, Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers

Shelly Clevenger, Sam Houston State University, Department of Victim Studies

Suzanne St. George Coble, M.S., Doctoral Candidate, Arizona State University

Jeff Cohen, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Criminal Justice, University of Washington Tacoma

Jenny Coleman, MA, LMHC, Director, Stop It Now!

Jacinta Cording, Ph.D., Lecturer in Forensic Psychology, University of Canterbury, New Zealand

Alison Cox, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Criminology

Christina DeJong, Ph.D., School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University

Angela Dwyer, Ph.D., School of Social Science, University of Tasmania

Victoria Police Academy Harriet Dymond, Trainee Forensic Psychologist, University of Nottingham

Desiree L. Elchuk, B.A.(Hons), MSc Student, Saint Mary's University

Diana L. Falco, Ph.D., Assistant Teaching Professor, University of Washington Tacoma

April Fernandes, MA, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, North Carolina State University

Edward M. Fernandes, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Social Psychologist/Sexologist

Melissa Fernandes, trainee counselling psychologist (DPsych)

Brian Frederick, Ph.D., School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Portsmouth (UK)

Maximilian Geradt, Ph.D., Professor

Cory Gerritsen, Ph.D., C.Psych, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, University of Toronto

David Greenberg, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, New York University

Xavier L. Guadalupe-Diaz, Ph.D., Framingham State University

Susila Gurusami, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, University of Illinois Chicago

Andrew J. R. Harris, M.Sc., Ph.D., C. Psych., Private Practice

Janelle Hawes, Ph.D., Assistant Professor

Ainslie Heasman, Ph.D., CPsych, Psychologist

Nicoletta Heidegger, MA, MEd, LMFT #110256, Ph.D. Student, Widener University

Thomas K. Hubbard, Ph.D., The William A. Percy Foundation for Social and Historical Studies

Maggie Ingram, M.H.S., Ph.D., Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Raymond Knight, Ph.D., Brandeis University
Besiki Luka Kutateladze, MA, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Florida International University
Amy L. Lawrence, M.A., Psychology Ph.D. candidate, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Spencer G. Lawson, M.S., Ph.D. Candidate, School of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University
Elizabeth J. Letourneau, Ph.D., Director of the Moore Center for the Prevention of Child Sexual Abuse, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Julia Levitan, BA (hons), Ph.D. Candidate, McGill University
Eric Madfis, Ph.D., School of Social Work and Criminal Justice, University of Washington Tacoma
Jeremy Malcolm, Ph.D., Executive Director, Prostasia Foundation
Dave McDonald, Ph.D., University of Melbourne
Jody Miller, MA, Ph.D., Distinguished Professor, School of Criminal Justice, Rutgers University
Michael H. Miner, Ph.D., LP, Professor and Research Director, The Institute for Sexual and Gender Health
Sarah Moss, MSc., MA student, University of Guelph
John O'Connor, MSc in Psychotherapy, Dublin Business School
Amanda Petersen, MS, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Old Dominion University
Alison Reed, MA, Ph.D., Old Dominion University
Theresa Robertson, Ph.D., LCPC
Kailey Roche, Ph.D. Student, Carleton University
Scott T. Ronis, Ph.D., LCP (VA), L.Psych., Professor & Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Psychology, University of New Brunswick
B. R. Simon Rosser, MPH, Ph.D., LP, University of Minnesota School of Public Health
Ashley Ruderman-Looff, Ph.D., University of Massachusetts Dartmouth
Taylor Scott, Psychology student, University of Canterbury
Kaitlyn J. Selman, Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice, ODU alum, Bellarmine University
Michael Seto, Ph.D., Professor in Psychiatry, University of Ottawa
Rita Shah, Ph.D., Eastern Michigan University
Jason R. Silver, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Rutgers University Newark
Maria Sklavou, LLB, MA, AFHEA, Ph.D. Candidate in Criminology, University of Sheffield
Skye Stephens, Ph.D., R.Psych, Associate Professor, Saint Mary's University
Gilian Tenbergen, Ph.D., The State University of New York, Oswego
John Thorne, MHS, Ph.D., Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Jace Valcore, Ph.D., University of Houston Downtown
Lauryn Vander Molen, BA(Hons), Ph.D. Student in Clinical Psychology, University of New Brunswick
Anneliese Westerman, Clinical psychology student, University of Canterbury
Gwenda M. Willis, Ph.D., PGDipClinPsysc, University of Auckland

**Signatures on this document reflect individual support for the messages contained herein and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the entities with which signatories are affiliated. The only exception is the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers, which offered organization-wide endorsement.*