

Suspended for Standing Up to Fox News?

Essex County College allegedly suspends a communications adjunct for comments about race on Fox News, but she's fighting back with the tools of her trade.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/06/21/college-allegedly-suspends-communications-adjunct-comments-about-race-fox-news>

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123 COMMENTS



[Lisa Durden speaking at Essex County College's Radical Women in Media panel in March](#)

Essex County College hired pop culture commentator and producer Lisa Durden as an adjunct professor of communications, in part for her past appearances on such networks as Fox News. She'd also built a relationship with the college over the years by inviting students to intern with her, assisting on TV and documentary production projects. But it took just one angry phone call about her recent appearance on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* for her to lose her teaching job, she says. "I was publicly lynched," she said Tuesday about being escorted from her summer-term class earlier this month to a meeting with administrators, who told her she was being suspended and investigated. "They wanted to send a message. 'See what happened to Lisa Durden? You know it could happen to me.' Free speech doesn't matter if you're a professor, make people mad and you're in trouble."

Durden says she was told that an unnamed person had called Essex to complain about her comments to Carlson the night before. The complaint surprised Durden because, in her words, she's a regular commentator on Fox and elsewhere on

everything from “Kim Kardashian’s ass to tough issues such as Black Lives Matter.” She’d appeared on a panel at Essex called Radical Women in Media, at the college’s request, earlier this year. And she'd satisfactorily -- to her knowledge -- taught two other courses in the spring term.

Pressed further, officials allegedly told Durden that she’d improperly identified herself on the show as an Essex professor. But Durden didn’t. The clip, in which she argues in favor of the right of Black Lives Matter protesters to claim all-black protest spaces on Memorial Day, includes no reference to Essex by Durden, Carlson or anyone else. In fact, Durden at one point says, "I'm speaking for Lisa Durden."

Durden is outspoken, but her comments aren't necessarily out of the ordinary for her, or for debate segments on cable news these days. When Carlson asked her why it was acceptable to exclude whites from a black gathering, she said, for example, "Boo-hoo-hoo, you white people are just angry you couldn't use your white privilege card to get invited to the Black Lives Matter all-black Memorial Day celebration." (She makes clear that she is not speaking for Black Lives Matter but rather defending supporters' right to hold the event.) Carlson argues that racially exclusive events are hypocritical and calls Durden "disgusting." She argues back that mainstream culture is implicitly exclusive of racial groups on regular basis; the *Bachelorette* TV show took 11 seasons to cast a black bachelorette, for instance, she says.

Despite not naming Essex during the show, Durden says she’s still being investigated. Someone else has taken over her course. She believes the college is “kowtowing” to a “racist,” publicly unidentified critic, rather than standing up for the free speech rights of a well-liked professor dedicated to working with students from the Newark area.

Many professors appear as commentators across networks, write op-eds or otherwise express their views as private citizens. The American Association of University Professors recognizes their right to do so and says that "professors

should be free from institutional censorship or discipline." Yet relevant AAUP policy cautions that "their special position in the community imposes special obligations. As scholars and educational officers, they should remember that the public may judge their profession and their institution by their utterances. Hence they should at all times be accurate, should exercise appropriate restraint, should show respect for the opinions of others and should make every effort to indicate that they are not speaking for the institution."

Durden, of course, is not a typical scholar in that she was an outspoken media personality before coming to Essex.

The experience has been eye-opening, she said, as she's learned the hard way about the lack of due process rights for adjuncts across the country. But this time Essex may learn a lesson, too, she said. "I'm a media person."

Durden and her supporters held a press conference Tuesday, calling for her reinstatement next academic year and for equitable working conditions for all instructors, for example. She and faculty and student allies also attended a Board of Trustees meeting on campus Tuesday evening.

They've also [circulated a petition](#) that's gained hundreds of names and attracted national attention. Questioning why a "predominantly black institution" would "effectively fire" Durden, the petition says she is a lifelong Newark resident "who has given her time and expertise generously to the youth of the city. She has provided highly competitive internships in New York media for Essex County College students for a decade. She was recently honored by the city of Newark for her outstanding work in media with women and young people."

Durden has braved "racist death threats from the alt-right movement to speak truth to power on national television," it says. "Why is Essex County College firing a beloved professor for exercising her First Amendment right? In Trump's America, are black women professors not allowed the right to free speech?"

Essex did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday. Jeffrey Lee, vice president for academic affairs, said in a statement to [NJ.com](#) that the college “promotes a community of unity that is inclusive of all” and that “general counsel has handled this matter in a way that complies with New Jersey state law.” He provided no further details.

A number of Durden's campus colleagues have written letters to the college, expressing support for her.

"For those of us who are involved in advocacy, politics, who may hold opinions which differ from those in different spaces, this kind of thing has a terrible chilling effect," wrote Rebecca Williams, an assistant professor of humanities. "As this suspension will become public in the world of academia -- and especially in black public intellectual circles -- it will bring more negative publicity to our institution even as we are trying to move forward with our new president," Anthony Munroe, who was appointed last month.

Jennifer Wager, professor of communications, wrote in another letter that she'd already asked Durden to teach courses in the fall and needed to know if she was returning.

"Durden has done amazing work for Essex County College for over a decade without ever getting paid," she said. "She has secured communications students coveted internships in New York media with top documentary producers and organizations[.] ... I find it shocking that an African-American woman would be so disrespected at her place of employment for merely exercising her First Amendment right to free speech."