

Faculty Grievance Committee  
Via Dr. Molly McGraw, Chair, Grievance Committee, Faculty Senate  
[acannon@selu.edu](mailto:acannon@selu.edu), [gregory.cannon@southeastern.edu](mailto:gregory.cannon@southeastern.edu)

January 22, 2026

*Re: Academic Freedom Grievance (Amended)*

Dear Dr. McGraw,

Our firm represents Dr. Fereshteh Emami. This correspondence is her amended academic freedom grievance. On July 28<sup>th</sup> 2025, Dr. Emami was removed from the Lake Maurepas Monitoring Project. We have obtained evidence strongly indicating that University officials removed Dr. Emami in retaliation for news coverage of the results of her research, thus violating SLU's Academic Freedom policy and her state and federal constitutional rights.

**A. Factual Background: “*There is a plan for Fereshteh. . . We are planning to remove Fereshteh Emami from the Air Products project.*”**

Dr. Fereshteh Emami is a tenured Associate Professor of Chemistry in the Department of Chemistry and Physics. Until July 28<sup>th</sup> 2025, she was also the principal investigator on the Air Products Lake Maurepas Monitoring Project.

On June 19, 2025, the Louisiana Illuminator published an article about Dr. Emami's work and the project's findings. The headline was that “Scientists find ‘alarming’ levels of toxic metals, pollution in Lake Maurepas.”<sup>1</sup> In particular, the article said that Dr. Emami's team had “traced most of the pollution to industrial and other human activities” and that “[a]rsenic levels peaked at 420% above the safe limit for lakes and 6,300% over the EPA's drinking water threshold.”<sup>2</sup>

The article immediately caused trouble with SLU's leadership. Multiple SLU employees forwarded the article to President Wainwright, and Wainwright forwarded it to the provost.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Kyle Piller, Director of the project, wrote that “the president's office was caught off guard when the story came out. Needless to say, they weren't overly pleased about it.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wes Muller, [Scientists find ‘alarming’ levels of toxic metals, pollution in Lake Maurepas](#), Illuminator (June 19, 2025).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> Exhibit A at pg. 34-36 (Bates 2000368-2000370)

<sup>4</sup> Exhibit A at pg. 20 (Bates 000720)

On June 20, 2025 – the day after the Illuminator article was published – an unknown university official texted to someone to ask “Is there any plan for Fereshteh?”<sup>5</sup> The response: **“Yes, there is a plan for Fereshteh. I will call you when I get a chance.”**<sup>6</sup>

The administration quickly began working on a plan to silence Dr. Emami and replace her as leader of the project. On June 22, 2025, Dr. Piller emailed Dr. McCarthy the “proposed stipulations” associated with the “cessation of her involvement on the project.”<sup>7</sup>

On June 23, 2025, Dr. McCarthy wrote to Provost Tena Golding that he and Dr. Piller were **“planning to remove Fereshteh Emami from the Air Products project.”**<sup>8</sup>

On June 24, 2025, Dr. Piller wrote to Dr. Emami, asking her to inform the Marketing and Communications office “of any media requests prior to conducting any interviews, particularly in regards to our Maurepas project.”<sup>9</sup> (That request was contrary to SLU’s media policy, which allows faculty to respond directly to media requests “specific to the purview of that department” and only inform the communications office of the request and response afterward.<sup>10</sup>)

On June 26, 2025, Dr. Piller circulated a “Job Ad Draft” for an Assistant Professor of Chemistry,<sup>11</sup> so as to replace Dr. Emami. Also that day, a university official texted “I’d like to chat with you about Fereshteh. I have an update from yesterday and want advice on how to proceed.”<sup>12</sup>

On July 2, 2025, Provost Golding met with Dr. Wainwright and others about the proposal to remove Dr. Emami.<sup>13</sup> She reported that “further conversations are needed before any action is taken.” Dr. McCarthy responded, “Ok. We are ready to act when given the go ahead.”<sup>14</sup>

On July 10, 2025, SLU President Dr. William Wainwright called a “time sensitive” meeting with Dr. Piller, Interim Dean Dr. Dan McCarthy, and SLU’s chief communications

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 23 (Bates 001560). These text messages were obtained through a public records request. The identities were redacted, but given the search terms the sender or recipient was either Dr. Piller, Dr. McCarthy, or Dr. Moyer.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> Ex. A at 38 (Bates 2000380).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 17 (Bates 000236).

<sup>10</sup> Media Inquiries, [Advertising and Public Records Requests Policy, Policy Procedure](#) (“If a department receives an inquiry regarding information specific to the purview of that department (examples – real estate stats from the Southeast Louisiana Business Center or expertise from a biology professor for an article regarding a biology-related topic) the individual department may respond. In such cases, however, the individual receiving the inquiry should still notify UCCS of the inquiry and response made.”)

<sup>11</sup> Exhibit A at 16 (Bates 000223).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 22 (Bates 001559).

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 37 (Bates 2000379).

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*

officer about “the DEQ and our Lake Maurepas Study.”<sup>15</sup> The issue was so time sensitive that President Wainwright asked Dr. Piller to Facetime in from out of state.<sup>16</sup>

Then, on July 21, 2025, an additional news story caused the situation to accelerate dramatically. By 5:30 a.m. that day, The Advocate had released a story about Air Products’ plan to conduct dredging operations in Lake Maurepas.<sup>17</sup> This was exactly the topic of some of Dr. Emami’s research: her papers had raised the concern that dredging in Lake Maurepas could “mobilize contaminants that affect both the lake ecology and human health.”<sup>18</sup>

By 6:00 a.m., President Wainwright began corresponding with Dr. McCarthy, Tara Dupre (Human Resources), Jacob Penton (Chief Audit and Compliance Officer), and Sam Domiano (VP for Admin and Finance).<sup>19</sup>

And at 12:37 p.m., Dr. Piller emailed Dr. Emami to “schedule a time to meet with you in person to talk about the Maurepas project.”<sup>20</sup> The purpose of that meeting was to inform Dr. Emami that she was being removed from the project, but Dr. Emami was not immediately available.

Then, on July 28, 2025, at 10:53 a.m., The Advocate reporter followed up with Dr. Piller and the chief communications officer.<sup>21</sup> He asked “When are you guys free to talk?” about a previous email about “heavy metals in crabs” and how the “crabs are pretty much immediately newsy.”<sup>22</sup>

That was the final straw. Less than two hours later, at 12:40 p.m., Dr. Piller sent Dr. Emami a letter removing her from the project without explanation.<sup>23</sup> That same day, Dr. Piller canceled Dr. Emami’s interview with a documentary film crew covering the project. Dr. Emami’s removal did not, however, end the media inquiry.

On August 1, 2025, the Illuminator released a story headlined “University sidelines scientist who exposed toxic metals in Lake Maurepas.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 1 (Bates 000033).

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 19 (Bates 000323).

<sup>17</sup> David Mitchell, [New battle over Lake Maurepas carbon capture plan ahead. This banned activity could play a role](#), The Advocate (July 21, 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Gunawardhana, T., Rahman, M. A., LaCour, Z., Erwin, E., & Emami, F. (2024). [Spatial Pattern Assessment and Prediction of Water and Sedimentary Mud Quality Changes in Lake Maurepas](#). *Environments*, 11(12), 268. & Rahman, M. A., Gunawardhana, T., LaCour, Z., Erwin, E., & Emami, F. (2025). [Heavy Metals, Chemical Pollution, and Hidden Clues: Decoding Lake Maurepas](#). *ACS omega*, 10(32), 35637-35650.

<sup>19</sup> Exhibit A at 11 (Bates 000148).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 18 (Bates 000237).

<sup>21</sup> Exhibit A at 4 (Bates 000132).

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 6 (Bates 000134).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 24 (Bates 000170).

<sup>24</sup> Wes Muller, [University sidelines scientist who exposed toxic metals in Lake Maurepas](#), Illuminator (July 31, 2025).

Because of that, Dr. Piller and Dr. McCarthy realized they had to *retroactively* find a reason to justify Dr. Emami's removal. They called a meeting to "discuss the situation with the recent press release and subsequent responses."<sup>25</sup> On August 1, 2025, Dr. McCarthy emailed Cheryl Hall, asking for old records about Dr. Emami. Dr. Piller assigned Margaret Adelman, a Grants Development Specialist, to start digging through old files, looking for negative material about Dr. Emami. On August 3, 2025, Ms. Adelman started sending Dr. Piller old emails from years past with commentary, like a February 2024 email with Ms. Adelman's commentary that it showed Dr. Emami "[b]eing sassy to Alicia."<sup>26</sup> Dr. McCarthy also started digging for negative material, emailing Georgina Little for a copy of her evaluation of Emami for the past year.<sup>27</sup>

On August 4th, 2025, Dr. Piller sent Dr. Emami a letter purporting to provide the reasons for her termination. The gist of the letter was that Dr. Emami was purportedly being removed for not moving the research along fast enough. That is, of course, facially implausible, given that removing a project leader with no warning and no replacement does nothing whatsoever to accelerate a project. And the emails leading up to Dr. Emami's removal do not suggest any significant concern with the speed of the project.

It is not totally clear *why* the media around Dr. Emami's research caused such consternation to the university administration. But there are some clues. As background, the Lake Maurepas research was funded by private industry to provide a set of baseline data that would show that the industry was not making the lake *more* polluted. The industry-funded Lake Maurepas research was bringing millions of dollars into the university. For that reason, in early July 2025 President Wainwright and Dr. McCarthy were attempting to replicate it elsewhere in the state.<sup>28</sup>

That expansion plan was derailed, however, when the media began reporting on the "alarming" results of the research – that the lake was far more polluted than had been believed, that industry was the likely source of the pollution, and that industry efforts in the lake might further mobilize and spread the existing contaminants.

Thus, the media reporting suggested that Dr. Emami's research was not *helping* industry as intended, but was actually revealing the *harm* industry had caused to the environment and potential human health. This likely imperiled the millions of additional dollars President Wainwright and Dr. McCarthy hoped to bring to the university by replicating the project for other industrial efforts. That is why within a day of the Illuminator article, university officials were already talking about the "plan" for Dr. Emami.

This has had a serious impact on Dr. Emami. It has negatively affected her reputation and career prospects, and it has caused her serious emotional distress. She also lost out on the

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<sup>25</sup> Exhibit A at 26 (Bates 000240).

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 13 (Bates 000161). *See also id.* at 8 (Bates 000136) (forwarding Nov. 2024 email with comment "Further proof she has no idea of what's going on.")

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 21 (Bates 001291).

<sup>28</sup> Exhibit A at 2 (Bates 000109) (Dr. McCarthy corresponded with President Wainwright about communicating publicly the "hope that other proposed sequestration projects undertake a similar sort of independent environmental study in the region where they are planning to bury the carbon dioxide.")

supplemental pay from the project, which was \$1,000 per month generally and an additional \$7,741.81 for summer months. Her teaching load also doubled, from two to four courses per semester. And unusually, she was not consulted about the additional courses to see if they fit with her schedule.

## **B. Policies and Rights Violated**

Dr. Emami's academic freedom is protected both by university policy and the United States Constitution. SLU's Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibility Policy states that a "teacher is entitled to full freedom in research and publication of results, subject to adequate performance of the other academic duties." It notes that "academic freedom includes the right of a member of the academic staff to exercise in speaking, writing, and action outside the University."

And it has long been settled law that the First Amendment binds public universities such as SLU,<sup>29</sup> and that faculty members do not surrender their "First Amendment rights to comment on matters of public interest by virtue of government employment."<sup>30</sup> First Amendment protections extend to "teachers and students," neither of whom "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate."<sup>31</sup>

Here, by removing Dr. Emami from leadership of her project because of the publication of her research, SLU violated both the school's academic freedom policy and the First Amendment.

We are not the only ones to raise this concern. On August 21, 2025, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression wrote to President Wainwright. The Foundation wrote that the fact that Dr. Emami "was instructed not to speak directly to the media without providing advance notice to the university and then kicked off the project one month after the article's publication strongly suggests that SLU retaliated against Emami because of her interview. We urge SLU to reinstate Emami to her role as PI and revise its policy requiring faculty to coordinate media interviews through the university."<sup>32</sup> On October 1, 2025, Tulane University Law School First Amendment Clinic noting that SLU's proposed policy "exposes faculty members to impermissible viewpoint discrimination for engaging in protected speech."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972) ("[T]he precedents of this Court leave no room for the view that, because of the acknowledged need for order, First Amendment protections should apply with less force on college campuses than in the community at large. Quite to the contrary, 'the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.'" (internal citation omitted).

<sup>30</sup> *Connick v. Myers*, 461 U.S. 138, 140 (1983).

<sup>31</sup> *Kennedy v. Bremerton School Dist.*, 597 US 507 (2022) (rejecting the idea of "treating everything teachers and coaches say in the workplace as government speech subject to government control.")

<sup>32</sup> Exhibit A at 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 32.

**C. Relief Sought**

Dr. Emami requests:

- That she be restored to her role as principal investigator on the Lake Maurepas Monitoring Project and her prior teaching schedule, and that her lost supplemental pay be restored;
- That an outside investigator be retained to assess President Wainwright, Dr. Piller, and Dr. McCarthy's actions in removing Dr. Emami, and that appropriate disciplinary action be taken based on the results of that outside investigation;
- That SLU amend its media policy to conform with the United States constitution, as detailed in FIRE's letter; and
- That SLU provide Dr. Emami with unredacted versions of Ex. A pgs. 11-12, 22-23, 26, and PRR response pages MOST,W 001553- MOST,W 00157.

**D. Witness List**

Dr. Emami may wish to call the following persons as witnesses at the hearing:

- President Wainwright, william.wainwright@southeastern.edu
- Dr. Dan McCarthy, daniel.mccarthy@southeastern.edu
- Dr. Kyle Piller, kyle.piller@southeastern.edu
- Margaret Adelman, margaret.adelman@southeastern.edu
- Michael Rivault, mike.rivault@southeastern.edu
- Tara Dupre, tara.dupre@southeastern.edu
- Jacob Penton, jacob.penton@southeastern.edu
- Sam Domiano, sam.domiano@southeastern.edu

Sincerely,

/s/ William Most  
William Most