

Daniel Zahn, Board Candidate

Colleges Are Facing Constitutional Crises; Penn State Needs Trustees to Meet the Moment

Colleges across the country are embroiled in constitutional crises. The federal government rescinds visas because it disagrees with students' speech. It pressures universities to renege on their institutional commitments, including those for diversity, equity, and inclusion. And it puts federal funds in limbo unless universities aid the attack, forcing universities to change curricula, cancel programs, and silence students and faculty with disfavored viewpoints. This attack impedes a university's ability to perform life-saving research, encourage lively debate about today's most pressing issues, and create safe and supportive learning environments for all.

Penn State is not immune to these crises. Our international students are being targeted. The federal government is pressuring us to change our values and remove programs designed to improve access and affordability. I understand why our leadership may be inclined to comply; losing federal funds would push our community further into financial jeopardy. But the federal government is assaulting fundamental free speech principles. Those principles are essential to Penn State's educational mission and a prerequisite for creating a strong intellectual community where members freely exchange ideas, conduct research, and seek knowledge and truth.

We face complex problems. We must improve our financial situation, safeguard our students, retain our values, and end continued encroachment on civil liberties across our campuses. But even before these constitutional crises, Penn State's leadership repudiated its obligations to the freedom of speech and the university transparency necessary for that speech. While on campus, I saw Penn State punish peaceful protestors, silence journalists, and pressure students to rescind invitations to disfavored speakers. I got involved in the fight to protect community voice by advocating for speech code reforms. Through this, I learned about Penn State's long history of silencing dissenting voices, including by weaponizing the state's police power and arresting students protesting racial violence and sweatshop labor. As an alum, I have been disappointed by our leadership's failures: to meet legal transparency requirements, to support student journalism essential to community voice, and to open the university campus to all views.

That's why I'm running for the Board of Trustees. My time at Penn State inspired me to become a civil rights lawyer; I went to Stanford Law School to study constitutional law and now work at a First Amendment nonprofit, where I protect speech and civil rights. The Board self-reports a lack of expertise in law, and only two of its thirty-eight members have shared that they have law degrees. Those trustees with law degrees add valuable skills and knowledge to the Board—one, who got a law degree in 1980, chaired a Harrisburg-based law firm and provides skills in business law, government relations, and nonprofit services; the other, who got a law degree in 1989, is executive vice president and chief corporate affairs officer at a healthcare company and provides skills in corporate law, government relations, and healthcare. But neither lawyer focuses on the constitutional concerns surrounding higher education today.

We need new leadership committed to the democratic principles essential to American society to meet this moment. I am proud to run alongside two other candidates with these commitments and the skills necessary to lead Penn State today. Sustainability investment strategist Uma Moriarity has the expertise to deal with our financial crisis while building resilience for the future. And higher education expert Katherine Wheatle is ready to support our land-grant mission to promote affordable and accessible education for all. Along with my expertise in constitutional law, we bring needed skills and value to Penn State's Board of Trustees. We have a chance to move Penn State forward as a leader in higher education—and as a leader in protecting free speech and students' rights. And you can help. Between April 21 and May 8, all alumni can vote in the trustee election at PennStateVotes.com. I hope you'll vote for us.