

OPINION

Texas A&M journalism debacle was president's fault

McElroy's views were out of step with Texas values.



Texas A&M President Katherine Banks speaks during an announcement about the Texas A&M-Concho Engineering Academy, Feb. 14, 2019, at Midland College in Midland, Texas. Texas A&M announced Friday, July 21, 2023, that Banks has resigned after a Black journalist's celebrated hiring at one of the nation's largest campuses unraveled following pushback over her diversity and inclusion work. (James Durbin / ASSOCIATED PRESS)



By Adam Kolasinski
12:01 PM on Jul 29, 2023

The recent failed attempt by Texas A&M University to [hire Kathleen McElroy](#) as director of its new journalism program has engulfed the university in controversy, resulting in the resignation of the university president and significant reputational damage to the institution. Most of my colleagues on the Faculty Senate blame our troubles on alleged interference in the hiring process by Texas A&M regents and independent stakeholder organizations. They are mistaken. The blame rests solely with former president M. Katherine Banks and her appointees who never should have extended an offer to McElroy and, when stakeholders raised concerns, handled the situation in an [unprofessional manner](#).

If the Board of Regents, as is alleged, expressed reservations about the choice of McElroy as a program director, they were justified in doing so. Given that McElroy was applying for an administrative position, it is reasonable for the regents, as the main governing body of the university, to expect that she share their vision for the program she was being hired to direct. McElroy is a known advocate for a new, [activist vision of journalism](#). Rather than report the facts as objectively as possible, and fairly explain both sides of controversies, she believes reporters must take a stand on which side of a controversy is “legitimate.” She disdains objectivity as a flawed journalistic tenet that stacks the deck against minorities. Whether it is preferable to create a journalism program promoting McElroy’s activist vision or the traditional one based on objectivity and fair reporting is a value judgment. If the regents believe the traditional vision better aligns with Texans’ values, as stewards of the public, they were right to weigh in on McElroy’s appointment.

Some of my colleagues assert such regent scrutiny of administrative candidates violates academic freedom. They are mistaken. Academic freedom covers faculty research and teaching, not administrative policies or vision, which must be aligned with that of the electorate.

In addition, McElroy’s past [advocacy for race conscious personnel policies](#) also made her a poor choice for any administrative position. In passing Texas Senate Bill 17 this year, elected representatives rejected racial preferences in the name of diversity at public colleges. Texas taxpayers therefore have a right to expect their universities to be run by administrators who believe in race-neutral hiring and admissions policies, which McElroy is on record as opposing.

Though independent organizations of university stakeholders, such as [The Rudder Association](#) (to which I belong), do not have the same public duties of stewardship as regents, they have every right to express their concerns to the university leadership about administrative appointments. The freedom to form organizations to petition governmental bodies, like public universities, is protected by the First Amendment. Likewise, public officials’ willingness to listen to concerns of organized citizens is an essential part of American democratic tradition. I am truly saddened to see some of my Faculty Senate colleagues objecting to members of The Rudder Association exercising their constitutional rights.

The blame for the latest debacle rests solely on former president Banks and her appointees. It is they who tried to hire McElroy even though she was a bad fit. Then, when legitimate objections were raised, instead of moving on to the next candidate, they tried to change the offer in an non-transparent (and possibly improper) way. To add insult to injury, when these actions came to light, they misled the Faculty Senate by denying involvement in the process.

Banks was rightly forced to resign for this, but our university will not recover until all her administrative appointees complicit in the debacle have been removed. They must be replaced with a new team of strong, ethical leaders who can align the interests of the faculty with those of the electorate, and command respect from all university stakeholders.

Adam Kolasinski is the James W. Ashton Republic Bank Professor of Finance at the Mays Business School at Texas A&M University. He is also a faculty senator. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.