

Statement on the SEA 202 sanction received by Professor Ben Robinson from Executive Dean Rick Van Kooten on August 9, 2025

8/20/2025

Summary

The Executive Committee of the Bloomington chapter of the American Association of University Professors (IUB-AAUP) expresses its profound concern and disappointment regarding the [sanction](#) imposed by Executive Dean Rick Van Kooten against Professor Ben Robinson (Germanic Studies) on August 9, 2025. This sanction violates both College policy and SEA 202 and, thus, threatens the values of shared governance and academic freedom.

At a time when the Dean has publicly affirmed, in emphatic terms, his commitment to faculty governance, this decision instead exemplifies a disregard for the very policies designed to ensure fairness, accountability, and respect for faculty rights, including policies passed by the College Policy Committee (CPC) with his approval. The sanction against Professor Robinson not only harms him individually; it sets a dangerous precedent for all faculty at Indiana University.

Background

SEA 202 and University Policy Context

Indiana's SEA 202 law explicitly prohibits punishment of faculty members for criticizing university leadership and requires adherence to established institutional procedures for handling complaints. In 2024, Indiana University's College Policy Committee (CPC) developed comprehensive procedures for SEA 202 complaints, which Executive Dean Van Kooten approved.

The Current Case

On August 9, 2025, Executive Dean Van Kooten issued a formal sanction against Professor Ben Robinson of Germanic Studies based on an anonymous complaint alleging violation of SEA 202's intellectual diversity provisions. The complaint claimed Professor Robinson "describes the war [in Israel] in untrue and unfair ways" and referenced his discussion of his arrest at a pro-Palestine rally on campus, in addition to mentioning Robinson's criticisms of IUB and university administration.

Analysis

Procedural & Governance Violations

In 2024, the CPC passed a [policy](#) that states a number of procedures which the Dean disregarded:

1. The complaint was filed anonymously. Though it claimed that it came from a student in a class Professor Robinson was teaching, that claim was never verified. In order to establish standing, one would have to determine with certainty that such a complaint actually came from a student. There is no evidence of the Dean or any other administrator at the university verifying the claim or identity of the complaint. VPFAA Docherty and, subsequently, Dean Van Kooten simply presumed that the complaint was filed by a student enrolled in the class, even with ample evidence from the respondent that he had been the object of a prolonged smear campaign and therefore a possible object of a malicious outsider presenting themselves as a student.
2. There was no effort to establish if sufficient objective evidence existed to pursue an investigation of the case. When someone states that professor Robinson “describes the war [in Israel] in untrue and unfair ways,” that person is making an assessment and not stating facts. What professor Robinson actually said is never quoted in the complaint or mentioned in the letter of reprimand. That professor Robinson spoke about his arrest at the “Pro-Palestine rally” can be accepted as fact, but a significant question remains: what is that evidence of, other than the brutality of the IU upper administration in relation to a peaceful event? Furthermore, SEA 202 explicitly states that faculty members may not be punished for criticizing the leadership of IU. In short, there is no objective evidence of an action that violates the principle of intellectual diversity.

Therefore, even though the complaint did not have standing and no objective evidence existed to pursue it further, the Dean chose to disregard both of these basic principles established in the CPC policy. But his disregard of the policy went further:

3. To determine how the review would proceed, according to the much-touted respect for faculty governance, the Executive Dean is obligated to communicate with the principal administrator—in this case the Chair of Germanic Studies—about the complaint and offer a review by the chair or the Complaint Review Committee (CRC), a body of peers appointed by the CPC. No such process took place. The Chair of Germanic studies was not informed of this. Professor Robinson was not offered the option to have the review done by his Chair.
4. The review process is to take place within three months before being forwarded to the reviewer, and this also did not occur. No explanation, no justification was offered to Professor Robinson. This delay further eroded confidence in the fairness of the process.

5. Most importantly, when the review process finds the complaint to be with merit, an investigation needs to take place, described in great detail in the policy. There is no evidence that an investigation took place to determine the extent of the case's merit. With the Chair never brought into the process, the obvious administrator who might have been able to verify the identity of the student, talk to other students in the class, and do any other necessary verification of the claims could not and never took place. No CRC panel was brought in. **The very basic notion of shared faculty governance was completely disregarded**, even as the Dean spoke to faculty on repeated occasions about his respect for faculty governance.

The AAUP regards the findings outlined in the letter of reprimand to have no standing and to be in violation of the policies passed by the CPC regarding SEA 202. In fact, the response itself further violates the law by punishing the faculty member for speaking out against the university administration, which is protected speech under that law. When the Dean describes those factual statements about Professor Robinson's experiences at work as "personal life experiences," he misrepresents the context in which the experiences took place (at work, in Dunn Meadow). A group of empaneled peers might have completely disagreed with this characterization. They might have supported the claim. But such a necessary step, in keeping with the policy, was never taken.

Broader Implications

When a Dean claims to respect faculty governance and at the same time does the opposite, his actions are duplicitous, abusive, and dangerous to shared faculty governance and the principle of academic freedom. Faculty governance is not merely procedural—it is the foundation of a university's legitimacy as a space of free inquiry.

The sanction of Professor Robinson sets a precedent whereby anonymous, unverified complaints can be weaponized against faculty and where administrators may act unilaterally, outside of established policy. Such precedents endanger all faculty, chilling speech, undermining trust, and weakening the capacity of the university to fulfill its educational mission.

Call to Action

The AAUP IUB chapter therefore:

- Finds the sanction against Professor Robinson to be invalid and without standing;
- Calls for the sanction to be rescinded immediately;
- Recommends University Administration and relevant policy committees work to clarify SEA 202 procedures and ensure all administrators understand their obligations and appropriate workflows under established policies;

- Demands that all future complaints under SEA 202 follow CPC policy, with mandatory verification, departmental consultation, and faculty peer review;
- Urges the administration to reaffirm its commitment to shared governance and academic freedom in practice as well as in words;
- Stands in solidarity with Professor Robinson and with all faculty whose rights to fair process and free expression must be protected.

The AAUP Bloomington chapter stands firmly with Professor Robinson and calls for his vindication through proper appeals processes. More broadly, we demand that university leadership recommit to the principles of shared governance, due process, and academic freedom that are essential to our institution's mission.

We urge all members of the university community to recognize that protecting faculty governance rights benefits everyone by ensuring that academic decisions are made through proper deliberative processes rather than administrative fiat.

We stand with Professor Robinson and with the principles of academic freedom and faculty governance that his case represents.

IUB-AAUP Executive Committee

iubaaup.org