

**JAMES A. LAKE ACADEMIC FREEDOM AWARD
NOMINATION
April 28, 2026**

The James A. Lake Academic Freedom Award Committee unanimously recommends the unusual step of awarding the three nominees for the James A. Lake Academic Freedom Award. The Committee's rationale is that Shared governance is a critical element of academic freedom in that it offers a kind of structural protection of academic freedom. In other words, faculty input on matters concerning academic programs is the mechanism by which scholarly assessments of the subject matter are brought to bear. All three nominees, in our view, were powerful advocates for shared governance and its relationship to academic freedom. Susan VanderPlas, especially, helped to develop a campus-wide teach-in focused on the use of statistics (her disciplinary home) to raise questions about the underlying statistical rationales for the elimination of academic departments and tenure line positions (in addition to a range of other, longer-term contributions). Sarah Zuckerman, through her many campus and AAUP roles, advocated strongly as well. Ultimately, one of the most highly public discussions of shared governance was carried forward through the vehicle of the no-confidence vote against Chancellor Bennett, which was publicized in numerous news outlets across the state and in higher ed media across the country. In most of those accounts, the spokesperson for that initiative was Beth Lewis who, while circumspect in discussing the stakes (both positive and negative), emerged as a strong voice regionally and nationally. Each of these three nominees also have a longer history of campus service focused on shared governance as a structural protection for academic freedom. The committee (by a unanimous vote) believes that all 3, collectively, have made important contributions to the welfare of our campus and, specifically, to the protections of academic freedom afforded by shared governance. In fact, the three nominees share some nominators in common. The committee respectfully recommends that all three share in this year's James Lake Award.

BETH LEWIS

Professor Lewis joined UNL as an Assistant Professor in the *Department of Teaching, Learning and Teacher Education (TLTE)* in 2009. She earned tenure and promotion to Associate Professor in 2015, and another promotion to Full Professor in 2022. Over the past 17 years, Dr. Lewis' impressive career has been founded on a unique combination of securing massive, externally funded infrastructural and institutional grants for teacher training programs with discipline-based research on science teacher education and professional development. This is highly relevant to the award in question, because for Dr. Lewis, professionalism is the prime directive and thus absolutely paramount. As she demonstrates in her professional service as well as her research, professional development and professionalism as a daily practice are inherently connected to principles of academic rights and responsibilities. By the same token, her record illustrates that respect for professional expertise cannot be divorced from the academic freedom to utilize said expertise.

Clearly, leading programs dedicated to training the next generation of teachers involves a broad range of substantive, pedagogical, and mentoring skills – which she has further showcased in recent years through her involvement across various campus units, such as the *UNL's Women in Science* and *SciComm* conferences, organized via the *UNL Center for Science, Mathematics, and Computer Education*. Professor Lewis's unique contributions in defense of teacher training stand out for their focus on the seamless connections between the ways academic freedom affects teachers in all contexts, from k-20+, and its foundation in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. This commitment has shaped her entire professional life and is evident in every aspect of her profile related to teaching, research, and professional service.

Even before her most recent promotion, Dr. Lewis became actively and visibly involved in initiatives related to shared governance and faculty rights/responsibilities at UNL. For example, starting in 2019, she served a three-year term on the *CEHS Dean's Faculty Advisory Committee*, where she played an instrumental role in conducting a survey on faculty needs and led an initiative to revise the college's faculty workload expectations.

Around the same time, she represented faculty interests at the campus level via the *Office of Diversity and Inclusion*, as part of an ad hoc committee seeking to establish equitable faculty mentoring guidelines. She also served on the *Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Women (CCSW)*, where she played a prominent role as Faculty Council Chair.

Starting in 2021, Dr. Lewis began serving as the TLTE faculty representative in the *UNL Faculty Senate*. Many senators have seen some of her trademark areas of involvement over the years, most recently as a Faculty Senate Executive Board Member. Most recently, this includes her leadership on the Senate's ad hoc committee regarding the new system-wide "metrics" proposed by President Gold's office. Allow me to also highlight the impact of her service on the *Academic Rights and Responsibilities Committee/ ARRC*, on which she served for two consecutive three-year terms, including stints as Chair/Vice-Chair (2023-25). As you know, the ARRC is charged with conducting reviews for a wide range of formal and informal faculty grievances. Dr. Lewis put together a comprehensive document or primer to "translate" dense institutional and senate bylaws into plain language for those of us in need of ARRC committee assistance (or serving on it). This is an excellent example of her communication skills with respect to academic freedom, rights, and responsibilities.

Dr. Lewis has made as a member of the UNL Advocacy Chapter of the *American Association of University Professors (AAUP)*. She has systematically enhanced efforts to strengthen academic freedom at UNL, and at the system level, via the chapter's faculty-elected *Executive Board*, where she has served as Member at Large, as Secretary for multiple consecutive years, plus as a presenter at a recent state-level AAUP conference. In recent years, she has led efforts to coordinate and integrate initiatives spearheaded by the UNL Faculty Senate that also align with the AAUP's advocacy chapters goals. For example, one of my personal favorites have been the Banned Book Raffles outside the UNL City Campus Student Union, which Dr. Lewis has helped us coordinate and at which she engages with students in lively conversation (aka "informal science education"). Notably, throughout the current academic year 2025-26, Dr. Lewis has proactively coordinated outreach across colleges and units at UNL during this profound institutional crisis. She excels at gathering people, articulating common ground, and providing much needed leadership for our media and communication campaign aimed at the Board of Regents and top central administrators. Her valiant and intrepid leadership undoubtedly has helped amplify the voice of UNL's faculty, including but not limited to the UNL Faculty Senate, in local and national media. Faculty beacons like Dr. Lewis remain invaluable to assets as we collectively pursue shared governance and protections for academic freedoms, rights and responsibilities.

SUSAN VANDERPLAS

Academic freedom is not just a right; it is also a responsibility, and it comes at the cost of personal courage and professional risk when exercised in moments of institutional strain. Susan VanderPlas exemplifies the very spirit of academic freedom in her goal to better the organization and the environment we all live in.

As a statistician, Dr. VanderPlas brought disciplinary expertise to the criticism of evaluating the data and metrics used in justifying the decisions in the recent budget cuts at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. As the main author behind the write-up for the hearings in the Academic Planning Committee, she provided a detailed discussion of the flaws in the definition of the metrics and the assembly of data used by UNL leadership. It is important to note that Dr. Vanderplas did not merely object on behalf of herself and the Statistics Department, but provided rigorous statistical explanations for why the analyses being used are methodologically flawed, lead to wrong conclusions, and hurt the whole of the University of Nebraska.

Dr. VanderPlas took the stand to speak up – in emails, blog posts, a seminar on YouTube, journal interviews, and public hearings. Such efforts are not without risk. Speaking openly about flawed institutional processes require intellectual honesty and personal courage. Dr. VanderPlas demonstrated both; again and again, she chose the inconvenience of transparency, fairness and open communication over convenient silence.

As a member of the faculty senate, and now the faculty senate executive committee, Susan has been a vocal advocate for faculty input in shared governance, including contributing to the creation of an Ad Hoc committee to address EM 16 and its numerous failures to consider the real work of faculty (because faculty did not have sufficient input).

Susan stood up bravely this past spring to bring to the Faculty Senate a motion for a vote of No Confidence for Executive Vice Chancellor Mark Button and other Executive Leadership Team members. She later withdrew this No Confidence motion, but it brought EVC Button to the table to meet with the national AAUP president, Todd Wolfson, and pressured President Gold to meet with AAUP and other faculty leaders. Through her actions, Susan has made clear that faculty will not be cowed by the administrators' actions in eliminating revenue generating departments.

SARAH ZUCKERMAN

The James A. Lake Academic Freedom Award honors those who work to preserve the freedom to seek and communicate truth. Sarah Zuckerman has done that by fighting to preserve the institutional conditions that make the practice of academic freedom possible for all of us.

Sarah currently serves as the president of the UNL chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), a body whose primary mission is “to advance academic freedom and shared governance.” Her academic work is particularly focused on educational leadership in rural communities, but she is an expert in the ways that academic organizations can build trust and enact change. Her activism in AAUP springs from a deep commitment to the value of academic freedom. Sarah served as the Faculty Senate representative for Educational Administration and was a member of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee. At both the Senate meetings and the Executive Committee meetings she frequently spoke and adamantly defended academic freedom and the rights of faculty members.

Leadership of AAUP took on a new level of demand in Fall 2025, when the Chancellor and Executive Leadership Team at UNL instigated the closure of the Department of Educational Administration, where Sarah is an associate professor. Throughout the fall, Sarah worked tirelessly not only to defend her own department, but also to coordinate across departments, bringing faculty up to speed on the expectations of shared governance that the administration should be held accountable to, pointing out when specific failures occurred, and rallying faculty attention and efforts. This drew the attention of the upper administration, making her a visible target, and she did this in spite of a strong distaste for public speaking.

Throughout her work before and during the department eliminations, Sarah maintained a practical focus on academic freedom. She worked behind the scenes to solicit, write, edit, and publish posts for the *Bugeater*, the UNL AAUP chapter blog, which helped keep the faculty informed of breaches of shared governance. More recently, she organized a meeting with President Gold and Chancellor Ankerson with members of the campus AAUP, where Ankerson posed the seemingly rhetorical question, “What is shared governance, anyway?” in response to a pointed question about administrative failures. As always, Sarah was ready with a specific, detailed answer.

Sarah has been a public and private voice for academic freedom, ensuring that more people understand what academic freedom is, and where it is in danger of erosion.