

ANTIOCH COLLEGE



Antioch College professor in 2013, installing an exhibit "An American Pastime," at the Herndon Gallery. (News archive photo by Lauren Heaton)

Casselli, AAUP question Antioch's handling of suspension

By Lauren Shows

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Michael Casselli told the News this week that his years with Antioch College have been bound up with his belief in its continued mission of education within a structure of shared government, upheld by institutional memory.

An alumnus who graduated from the college with an art degree in 1987, Casselli — who had been working in the arts in the U.S. and abroad for two decades — returned to campus in 2008 after Antioch University announced the college's closure, and decided to stay. He worked with the Nonstop Institute to keep the historic college's mission visible and alive while the college gained independence from the university in 2009. After the revived Antioch opened to students in 2011, he became part of its arts faculty.

"I've spent 18 years of my life working on that place," Casselli said. "I believe in it as an institution."

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That's part of why, he said, his recent indefinite unpaid suspension feels larger than an employment dispute. Having earned tenure in 2021, Casselli said he believes the suspension undercuts the academic freedom that Antioch has always championed, and that tenure is designed to protect.

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He told the News that being suspended indefinitely with conditions, in his view, amounts to being fired without the due process historically afforded to, and expected by, tenured faculty — a concern also raised by the American Association of University Professors, or AAUP.

Casselli was initially terminated by the College in February following what he called “a very heated disagreement with a colleague.” He said the disagreement was “primarily on my side,” and wrote in correspondence with the College that he apologized and viewed his own behavior as regrettable.

But the issue at hand for Casselli is not whether the January incident occurred; rather, he said, it’s “the process that was not used” to instigate his initial termination and later indefinite suspension without pay.

“I want to take responsibility,” Casselli said. “I thought we were going to move through a process similar to mediation.”

In a June 2 letter to Antioch President Jane Fernandes, the AAUP — a national union and membership association that advocates for faculty and other academic professionals — wrote that Casselli’s indefinite unpaid suspension is a “matter of serious concern,” and should have been preceded by a “dismissal-style hearing” before an elected faculty committee.

The College has framed the issue as being about workplace behavior within a professional environment. In letters reviewed by the News, Antioch described its actions as responses to documented conduct and safety concerns rather than disagreement over academic viewpoints or academic freedom.

Last week, ahead of running a letter to the editor that cited Casselli’s termination and later suspension, the News requested comment from Antioch College; Fernandes submitted a written statement in response, which was printed in full in last week’s “Community Forum” section.

In the statement, Fernandes said the College is “committed to maintaining a safe, respectful and inclusive environment for students, faculty and staff.” She wrote that when conduct concerns arise, the College follows policies designed to ensure “a fair, thorough and appropriate review,” but added that personnel privacy limits what the College can share publicly.

The News reached out to Antioch again this week after speaking with Casselli; the College declined to comment further and directed the News again toward its written statement.

The College first notified Casselli of disciplinary findings in a Feb. 9 letter following the January dispute and a later meeting between Casselli, then-Provost Brian Norman, a faculty advocate and the colleague involved in the dispute.

In that letter, Fernandes wrote that Casselli had engaged in misconduct constituting workplace violence under College policy. The letter cited “undisputed facts,” including “threatening, intimidating, and derogatory language in a public setting where students were present,” his “acknowledgment of responsibility” and a broader pattern of behavior. Any further violation, the letter stated, would result in immediate dismissal.

Casselli pushed back on the College’s findings in a Feb. 13 response, calling the assertions of “undisputed facts” and a documented pattern of behavior “incorrect statements.” He wrote that there had been “no evidentiary hearing,” and that the incident “did not involve violence or threats of any sort,” but was “only an argument that eventually did include some yelling.” He said the disagreement occurred in his office, that he was not aware of students nearby and that he had apologized for his behavior.

“I never threatened,” Casselli told the News. “I’m not a physically violent person.”

The Feb. 9 letter gave Casselli until Feb. 13 to make a decision between three options: undergo unpaid suspension with conditions for possible return, be terminated for cause or resign in lieu of termination.

The suspension option would have barred him from campus and contact with the colleague involved in the dispute, required anger management counseling and delayed a possible return to his position until at least Aug. 15, with at least six months of probation and a permanent final warning. He would also be required to sign nondisclosure and nondefamation agreements, and agree not to “weaponize students, alumni, or other community members against the College.”



Rather than select one of the options, Casselli requested “a full hearing before the Faculty Promotion and Review Committee and all other applicable processes, including the inclusion of the Board of Trustees.” He objected to being required to choose within four days from what he called “three equally unacceptable ‘options,’” and wrote that the nondisclosure and nondefamation requirement “violates the principles of free expression, academic freedom and the fundamental values of Antioch College.”

“I challenged it because I found it to be unfair, lacking process and arbitrary,” Casselli told the News.

On Feb. 19, Fernandes denied Casselli’s request for a hearing and terminated his employment for cause, effective that day, citing a provision in the College’s Faculty Personnel Handbook allowing termination of a tenured position due to “moral turpitude,” a term not defined in the handbook; the same provision had been cited in the College’s initial disciplinary findings.

Casselli argued in his Feb. 13 response that his January conduct did not constitute “moral turpitude,” and said he believed the College’s use of the term was intended to characterize his conduct as a fireable offense within the limited options the handbook outlines for terminating tenure.

On March 2, Fernandes emailed Casselli that the Board of Trustees had directed her to suspend his termination, restore his pay and benefits and continue further investigation, including review by the Faculty Promotion and Review Committee. While the process continued, Casselli was not allowed on campus or permitted to teach. Casselli said he believes the Board’s guidance to Fernandes reflected concerns about the process used to arrive at termination.

“I think it was presented to the board, and the board had questions,” he said.

The matter continued May 20, when Fernandes wrote that the College had reviewed its policies and concluded Casselli would be suspended without pay until he provided “satisfactory evidence” that he was “able and willing to return to work in full compliance with all College policies.”

The letter barred Casselli from faculty duties and campus access except with written permission, and made any change in status contingent on medical and psychological “fit for work” certificates; anger management, workplace behavioral coaching or similar training; demonstrated commitment to College policies; and agreement to any ongoing restrictions or monitoring requirements deemed necessary by the College.

Casselli wrote back May 26 and questioned why physician statements were required when he had not been on medical leave and said he had “no physical or mental impairments” preventing him from working. He also asked what would satisfy the College’s requirements and what restrictions he would be expected to accept, writing that “it is not reasonable to ask me to agree to something if I do not know what the terms are.”

In a June 4 response, Fernandes directed Casselli to complete a professional anger management or comparable conflict de-escalation program and sign a statement agreeing to follow College conduct and safety policies, but did not address his question about why medical certification was required.

Fernandes also wrote that the College retained “sole discretion” to determine whether its concerns had been addressed and when and whether he could return. The College could determine that Casselli would not return to his position even if he completed one or more requirements, the letter said.

In his interview with the News, Casselli said that “sole discretion” is why he believes his suspension is effectively permanent.

“When does it end?” he said. “It’s totally subjective.”

The AAUP, having already written to the College with concerns in May ahead of Casselli’s indefinite unpaid suspension — that letter was published in last week’s issue of the News — expanded on its concerns in its June 2 letter. AAUP Senior Program Officer Mark Criley wrote that the organization had previously contacted the College over concern that Casselli was facing termination for cause without a hearing before an elected faculty committee.

Criley wrote that while the AAUP was “heartened” that the College had not immediately dismissed Casselli without such a hearing, the indefinite unpaid suspension constituted a “major sanction, second in severity only to dismissal,” and

reiterated that Casselli should be given a hearing. Criley added that an indefinite suspension with conditions for return is “tantamount to a dismissal,” particularly when the administration alone determines whether those conditions have been met.

“While we would welcome correction, it remains our understanding that Professor Casselli has not been afforded such a hearing,” Criley wrote. “The allegations against [Casselli] are serious and the sanctions he faces are severe; both threaten his career and his reputation. Common decency and basic principles of fairness call for them to be contested before a representative body of his professional peers.”

Casselli told the News that what drew him to Antioch College as a student were its “pedagogical ethos” and “community-based shared government ethos,” and they were part of what brought him back in 2008.

“I feel very strongly about the place, what it did for me and what it represented,” he said.

Through that lens, Casselli said he believes the way his case has been handled reflects an erosion of shared government and faculty process at the College. He said he doesn’t view the January incident itself as an academic freedom issue, but does view the process used afterward as such.

“If we don’t maintain these structures that we’ve all agreed upon for process, then our academic freedoms are being impinged,” he said.

At press time, Casselli remains barred from campus, though he said he’s continued to offer assistance to his students when they ask.

“I just lent a student my recliner for their senior project film and made stuff for their shoot,” he said. “I’ve talked to the students, and they’re upset, because I have a good relationship with them. They’re the reason I was there, right?”

On June 3, one of Casselli’s students began circulating a petition, with signers asking Antioch administration to allow Casselli to be on campus for upcoming events, including Reunion, where he was intended to be the recipient of the Alumni Association’s J.D. Dawson Award.

“We believe he should be there for it,” the petition reads. “Due to his contributions to student projects and the college as a whole, his presence at these events is important to us.”

Despite his dispute with the administration, Casselli said he “does not want to see [Antioch College] fail.”

“I believe it can continue, and I believe it can be successful,” he said. “And I believe if the community gives voice to asking questions, I think it has a chance.”

And though he said he is not sure what the final resolution should be — reinstatement, settlement or something else — he wants the process itself to be clear.

“If you have all this stuff on me,” he said, “let’s do the process.”

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One Response to “**Casselli, AAUP question Antioch’s handling of suspension**”



Bruce LeBel says:

June 29, 2026 at 1:00 pm

The article lays out a troubling pattern: Antioch College bypassed its own written procedures at nearly every step of Professor Casselli’s case. He was initially terminated for cause, invoking “moral turpitude,” a term left undefined in the Faculty Personnel Handbook, without the dismissal-style hearing before an elected faculty committee that the AAUP correctly identifies as mandatory for sanctions of this severity. The Board of Trustees itself apparently had sufficient doubts about the process to reverse the termination. Yet rather than correct course with proper procedure, the administration pivoted to an indefinite unpaid suspension, a sanction the AAUP characterizes as

second in severity only to dismissal, again without a hearing. The AAUP's assessment is unambiguous: this violates basic principles of academic fairness.

The College's characterization of a heated verbal argument in Professor Casselli's own office as "workplace violence" is both inflammatory and disproportionate. Casselli acknowledged the argument, expressed regret, and sought mediation. That is the conduct of someone who respects process. What followed from the administration was a four-day ultimatum demanding he choose between three options, including signing nondisclosure and nondefamation agreements and agreeing not to "weaponize" the Antioch community. That reads as a pressure campaign to suppress legitimate faculty voice, not a fair review.

Context matters here. Michael Casselli has spent 18 years in service to this institution, through Non-Stop Antioch when the University shuttered the College, through faculty leadership, through trustee and alumni board service. He is this year's recipient of the J.D. Dawson Award, the Alumni Association's highest honor, and his own students have petitioned for his presence on campus to receive it. That record demands the College honor its commitment to due process before making career-ending determinations.

Professor Casselli is opinionated and outspoken. So were many faculty, students, administrators and alumni who made Antioch the institution it is. The question the College must answer is whether it has the institutional integrity to follow its own written processes without hiding behind a facade of allegations. As things stand, the answer appears to be no, and that failure in this matter places the College at serious legal, fiscal and reputational risk.

Bruce LeBel, Antioch College Class of 1976

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