

ACLJ Files Federal Lawsuit Against Major State University for Antisemitic Dismissal

The ACLJ has just filed a Title VII lawsuit against the University of Maryland, alleging that the university illegally discriminated against a Jewish professor based on her religion and then illegally fired her after she filed a grievance complaint.

Dr. Melissa Landa was a professor at the University of Maryland for 10 years until her dismissal in 2017. Everything was going well until she started to become more open about her Jewish beliefs. In December 2015, Dr. Landa organized a group to address antisemitism at Oberlin College. Her supervisor criticized her efforts. In March 2016, Dr. Landa joined an anti-BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) organization, at which point that same supervisor abruptly withdrew his participation from a presentation at a conference in which he and Dr. Landa were supposed to share a podium.

A month later, with prior written approval, Dr. Landa traveled to Israel to celebrate Passover. In compliance with university policy, she taught classes over Skype with her teaching assistants in attendance, yet she received an email from her department chair saying that what she had done was unacceptable and threatening her job. Upon information and belief, when other (non-Jewish) professors made similar arrangements, the administration was fine with it. Dr. Landa came home and reported religious discrimination to the college diversity officer.

In May 2016, Dr. Landa informed her supervisor that she had

received a grant to create a partnership with a college in Israel. Her supervisor responded by abruptly removing her from the literacy course she had helped to create and had taught for over 10 years, which also prevented her from establishing the partnership as well as doing her research and maintaining her role in her department. She was replaced with someone who had minimal experience. Dr. Landa then requested to teach a different course that would enable her to complete her research and remain a part of the faculty. Instead, the remaining courses were assigned to doctoral students, violating university policy and resulting in student complaints to the dean and provost. Dr. Landa once again reported discrimination to the dean but no action was taken. After a third complaint in September, she was referred to the university's Ombuds officer who suggested a compromised role for Dr. Landa, which her department chair refused. In February, Dr. Landa filed a faculty grievance against her supervisors.

The grievance hearings began in May 2017. In their evidence to the grievance board, her supervisors discussed Dr. Landa's anti-BDS work at Oberlin. That same month, she received the College of Education's award for exceptional scholarship and a letter of commendation from the associate vice president for International Affairs. The grievance board ruled that although it was within the supervisor's right to reassign Dr. Landa, they hoped Dr. Landa would be put back on the elementary education faculty to teach and complete her research. Three days later, however, her supervisor sent an email to Dr. Landa informing her that her contract would not be renewed, with no explanation.

In June 2017, Dr. Landa filed a claim of discrimination and retaliation with the Office of Civil Rights and Sexual Misconduct at the University of Maryland. They determined that no discrimination or retaliation had occurred but their report shows that the investigator contacted only two of Dr. Landa's

eight witnesses.

In January 2018, Dr. Landa filed a claim with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). In April 2020, the EEOC determined a Reasonable Cause finding against the university; and in May, the university rejected conciliation attempts. The Department of Justice issued a right-to-sue letter and the ACLJ has now filed a Title VII complaint on behalf of Dr. Landa.

At the ACLJ, we stand with students, faculty and anyone else facing illegal and unlawful discrimination. No one should be treated differently because of their beliefs, and we are proud to stand in the gap. {eo}

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