

Academic Freedom Case Study

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Anna Allan is a tenured Associate Professor of Psychology at Polygon University (PUI) a large research university in Indiana. Allan runs a highly productive research lab studying the effects of gun violence on student learning; she is currently supervising two postdoctoral fellows funded by the National Research Foundation.

Bart Bloggins, an untenured Assistant Professor, teaches military history at Polygon University. Bloggins is a co-PI with Anna Allan on the NRF grant studying gun violence.

C.C. Clinker is the Vice President for Public Affairs at Polygon University.

Danielle Dearth is a senior history major and the President of the Polygon Students for Concealed Carry (PSUCC), an approved student organization.

Ervin Eskridge is a political activist and social media influencer routinely in the news for his commentaries on campus free speech. Eskridge is tied closely to FAR-OUT.

Flugelhorn Activist Rights Organization for Understanding and Transformation (FAR-OUT) is an independent nonprofit advocacy group that underwrites campus speakers, student internships, advocacy events, scholarships, and media appearances.

Gordie Gorbachev is Professor of History at Malvolio College (a private Catholic liberal arts college).

Heather Halliburton is an anti-Eskridge student activist at Polygon University '20.

The Facts: Background

Professor **Anna Allan** (with her research collaborator Bart Bloggins) holds a National Research Foundation grant to continue their study of the relationship between internet advocacy media and gun violence. In addition to direct costs of research, the grant funds two postdoctoral fellows at Polygon and a staff project manager for a three year term. The grant funds a series of academic conferences in Washington DC, in which the PIs and other academic colleagues present research findings and make policy recommendations to governmental actors. Allan has a strong social media presence, with 31,000 Twitter followers, a small number of whom are fans and promoters of her work who share and amplify her messages. One of the project postdocs creates a simple “bot” program intended to promote research findings and related

communications across several social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and WeChat.

Bart Bloggins is the faculty sponsor of the Polygon University student chapter of PSUCC (Polygon Students for Concealed Carry), a political advocacy group led by senior History major **Danielle Dearth**. PSUCC has invited the controversial firebrand **Ervin Eskridge** to speak on campus; Bloggins approves the invitation, as he is required to do by the generally applicable rules for Polygon student organizations. Eskridge is a notorious public figure with a history of extreme and inflammatory rhetoric directed against gun control advocates. Some students in PSUCC group did not support Eskridge as a speaker, since they anticipated his visit would create turbulence on campus. Because Eskridge's speaker fee is \$75,000, PSUCC accepted the offer from **FAR-OUT** (an independent advocacy org with deep pockets) to pay his appearance fee. Student groups plan to protest Eskridge's appearance on campus. One activist group led by **Heather Halliburton** (Polygon '20) makes a public Facebook post requesting advice for effective tactics to "de-platform" provocative speakers; she also invites the broader community to protest Eskridge. Recognizing the potential for violent unrest that Eskridge's appearance may provoke, the Polygon administration hires an additional private security firm to cover the lecture hall and the surrounding public spaces. The cost of the additional security detail is \$125,000.

The Facts: Conflict and Crisis

Incensed by the idea of Eskridge speaking on campus, and perceiving the invitation to be an endorsement of his political opinions, Anna Allan writes an angry email to Bloggins, encouraging him to withdraw the invitation while citing her research findings. Bloggins refuses. Danielle Dearth (student President of PSUCC) writes an op-ed in the [Polygon Tribune](#) chiding faculty and students for their intolerance of gun-rights arguments and ideas. Allan circulates an email on an internal faculty listserv, encouraging colleagues to protest the Eskridge appearance, providing a link to the student op-ed and a link to a YouTube video of Eskridge's recent speech at Malvolio College, a private Catholic liberal arts college. Allan's email calls out Bloggins for authorizing the invitation. Bart Bloggins receives a number of disapproving emails immediately, describing the Eskridge lecture as a threat to campus security and a harm to the intellectual community that colleagues are trying to build. On one such email list, Danielle Dearth's senior thesis advisor reads the message, then suggests that she find a new supervisor. Dearth receives a number of anonymous threats via social media and the campus email service.

Bart Bloggins shares the negative messages in their entirety within a long public Facebook post, describing himself as "a victim of censorship and campus politics run amok." He also calls out a list of his "faculty tormentors" by name and contact information, singling out Anna Allan as a

“dangerous traitor to cherished rights and liberties” and asking for his followers to “tell her she will not replace us in the academy.” Anna Allan writes three tweets on the subject:

@ErvinEskridge is coming to our community next week! He must be stopped by any means necessary! Tell @PolygonUniversity to dump this troll!! #protest #notoEskridge #trollalert

Ass Prof of History @PolygonUniversity @Bart_Bloggins is promoting hate and violence. BETRAYED by this former friend. Don't get me started on the joke that is his copy-paste plagiarism...err “scholarship.” History profs take note! #fakeprof #plagiarist

@PolygonUniversity rising against the hateful Eskridge. These kind of trolls need to be lined up against a wall and shot, just like old times.

The bot program designed to amplify research findings shares these tweets. The number of impressions of Allan's messages (e.g. how often they are read) is roughly 300,000. Sensing a crisis brewing, **C.C. Clinker**, director of communications at Polygon, writes to Allan and Bloggins, rebuking them for “bringing the University into disrepute” and telling them to refrain from any further social media activity or public communication. Clinker also issues a press release: “the recent opinions circulated by Professors Allan and Bloggins do not represent the position of Polygon University on these sensitive topics.”

Bloggins and Allan are on the receiving end of threatening messages. Allan opens a spring-loaded envelope that sprays her with what turns out to be baby powder. The enclosed message includes the statement “Enjoy some Anthrax!” and a picture of her apartment at night seen from the street. Bloggins receives hostile emails from colleagues in History departments across the country. A number of historians led by Professor **G. Gorbachev** announce that they will remove his research from their syllabus and refuse to review his scholarly work for purposes of publication and promotion. PSUCC students protest Allan's classes and stand outside her office with “yes to concealed carry” placards while intimating that they are armed. Heather Halliburton, Polygon class of 2020, protests Bloggins by chanting “free speech kills” during his classes. The NRF administrators get wind of this kerfluffle, recall their funding from the collaborative grant, and make the PI's ineligible for future funding for five years. The grant-supported postdocs and project manager therefore will lose their jobs at the end of the academic year. Eskridge withdraws from the lecture.