

Robert Ortega Remarks to Regents
March 29, 2018

Regents, President Schlissel, Provost Philbert, Honored Guests, Good afternoon.

My name is Robert Michael Ortega, Associate Professor of Social Work at the number one school of social work in the country; an honor we've maintained for many years. I am finishing my 27th year as faculty and completing my year as Distinguished Faculty of the Year. I was born and raised in Grand Rapids and Wyoming, Michigan, am the fifth oldest of nineteen children; twelve of whom are biological with one father and one mother. I am Latino, married with three children, educated with four degrees from the University of Michigan including a joint doctoral degree in Social Work and Psychology, and I bleed maize and blue!

Next month I will complete my one-year service as Chair of the Faculty Senate and Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs. I had the pleasure of working with, and for, an outstanding staff, faculty, administration and phenomenal student leaders and humbly appreciate the confidence my faculty colleagues showed in me and my leadership.

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This year I had an up-close look at how public universities across the nation became a platform for a wide range of issues and tensions but the question that always came back to me was, “Where’s faculty at...?”

Before the academic year started I was asked about our faculty’s stance on the proliferation of racist graffiti beginning with the derogatory comments about the Latinx students and Latinx community scrawled on the rock on Hill and Washtenaw, and then more vandalism appeared in the dorm with pejorative words cowardly scrawled on the doors of students of color. I was alerted to threats of capricious immigration enforcement focused on international students from certain countries and DACA students, and about the marginalization of campus members based on their expressions of gender, religion, ethnicity and other social identities.

Faculty engaged in multiple discussions about divisive hate speech fueled by debates about who is the real exploiter or suppressor of free speech – polarized as either alt-right, ultra-conservative nationalists or liberal, free-thinking and biased academicians and left-wing students.

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Students invited faculty leadership to join them in their fight to strengthen our University's stance against sexual harassment and violence despite the backdrop of government policies purported to strengthen campus responses to student sexual misconduct yet criticized for protecting perpetrators and undermining the rights of victims.

The #METOO movement saw the takedown of University administrators, faculty and other high-profile figures around the country for conduct that violated the dignity and worth of powerless and vulnerable members of the campus community. And we had to confront the reality that, we, too, must do better to protect our own powerless and vulnerable members of our community.

I sat in on discussions about increased concerns for athlete safety from high-impact sports as well as our own assessment of how we are monitoring and providing mental health services and reporting mechanisms that protect athletes from hazing, shaming practices, and sexual exploitation.

And faculty weighed in on institutional practices regarding the naming of buildings, erecting statues, displaying art and valuing other iconic representations

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of a past that promoted the many historical sources of social injustice that went unchallenged.

Through these challenges I was proud to say that our President, Provost and Executive Officers physically stood together on more than one occasion to face the anger and rage of our campus community. I greatly respect their willingness to stand with student (and non-student) demonstrators who made visible the privileges and oppression that remain an illusive aspect of our campus culture and climate. Rarely did I feel our leadership was protecting the parochial interests of a past that failed to align with current efforts to promote, and condemn threats to our core values of solidarity, tolerance, diversity, equity, and civility on campus. And even in an article appearing in today's Chronicles of Higher Education, all eyes are on Michigan as we confront the meaning of civility in the context of assumptions about appropriate ways to express differing viewpoints without restricting, interrupting or silencing them.

On more than one occasion I did wonder if we, as a larger campus community were working together. I wondered if Regents had interest in faculty voices on

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matters impacting our campus life. I wondered if Regents were asking, “Where’s faculty at...?”

As the recent past SACUA Chairs Silke-Marie Weinick and Bill Schultz stated in their farewell addresses to the Regents, it is the faculty that carry forward the core mission of the university and any university’s reputation will surely stand and fall with the reputation of its faculty. They remind us that faculty are more than just employees with expertise. We are also citizens committed to our University. We consider it a privilege to bear and accept responsibility for our part in making Michigan the greatest University in the world, as James Earl Jones and more recently, Coach Beilein loudly proclaimed!

In my leadership roles I make it a point to leave office knowing it is a better place than when I arrived. I believe I’ve done some good. Our Senate Committee work fulfilled a wide range of charges we believe contribute to improved faculty presence on timely campus matters, increased and clarified protections to support faculty and their work, and lent greater faculty expertise on academic matters affecting faculty on all three campuses.

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We have reasserted our commitment to academic and intellectual freedom. We engaged in a public outreach project to educate the cadre of incoming faculty and research scientists about faculty governance. Through a brief video describing critical aspects of University faculty governance we are inviting their participation in this important service. We became more mobile by holding SACUA meetings in Dearborn, the Medical School, School of Engineering and next week we are meeting in the Business School. Faculty Senate Assembly meetings became more interactive, and next month we are hosting several Michigan institutions of higher education from across the state to discuss current and emerging campus challenges to faculty governance.

But I still remain concerned about our anonymity. I am leaving my role as Chair even asking myself, “Where’s faculty at...?” I am not convinced that faculty are invited into critical conversations in a timely manner and at key junctures in the decision-making process. Nor are we consistently accounted for in events and University activities as part of an inclusive University. Nor am I convinced that our relationship with our Regents, our chief stewards who ultimately hold us all accountable for doing our part in ensuring the highest academic quality, is at a

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level that demonstrates our shared responsibility to keep this the greatest University in the world.

I did enjoy a recent conversation with Regent Diggs that allowed us to humanize our connection to the University while sharing our perspectives on important matters including our perspective on our LEO instructors and current contract negotiations. Regent Diggs convinced me that transparency is not a concern when we find opportunities to get together and allow ourselves to ask each other questions. Various SACUA members are scheduled to meet with Regent Neuman, Regent Richner and we are penciling in meeting times with Regent Weiser. We appreciate these opportunities to learn more about the work of Regents and welcome questions and interest in faculty governance matters. We see these opportunities as giving legitimacy to faculty leadership that can hopefully lead to invitations to Board meetings and other opportunities to join together. Likewise, we would be interested in inviting Regents to Senate Assembly and SACUA meetings to allow a full and open exchange of ideas.

We know that Michigan is not impervious to the challenges experienced on major campuses throughout the country. And if ever there was a time for our Regents,

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administration, faculty, and students to stand as one voice, that time is now. I

have no doubt that emerging realities will require us to stand together, to share

the responsibilities to uphold our mission, and bear the weight of our

responsibility to each other and the communities we serve. As we have seen

across the country and in our own state, when any one of us fails to uphold our

responsibilities we impact the safety, trust, support and hope that is the bedrock

of campus life and the foundation upon which we all thrive.

And in standing together I invite Regents to look around and ask the question,

“Where’s faculty at...? And hopefully we will be present or are provided an

opportunity to respond.

Cesar Chavez (whose son-in-law Arturo Rodriguez, is an alumni of our School of

Social Work and current President of the United Farm Workers Union) once said:

“What I do shows people what kind of person I am”

I would assert that what we do together shows the world what kind of people we

are...

Thank you and Go Blue!