

January 23, 2025

Dear President Ono and University Leaders,

Our academic work as faculty at this great university depends on our freedom, as scholars and as citizens, to pursue unpopular and controversial subjects. That freedom is underpinned by the surety that the University will support our projects and endeavors, politically and administratively, even in the face of criticism.

The circumstances surrounding the dismissal of Ms. Rachel Dawson, formerly head of the Office of Academic Multicultural Initiatives, is a cause for alarm for us, for we see her fate as irrevocably linked with ours. The two people who submitted the complaint against her claim that—at a private conversation at an academic conference—Ms. Dawson said that the University was “controlled by wealthy Jews.” We reject the noxious antisemitism that underlies this alleged comment. Ms. Dawson [denies](#) that she uttered this or other objectionable things, either at the conference in question or at any other time. There was no recording of these utterances, and the University’s own investigators found that it was “not possible to determine with certainty whether Ms. Dawson made the exact remarks.” During her seven years at the University, no UM student or employee has made an allegation of bias or discrimination against Ms. Dawson. In October 2024 the UM administration took the decision to impose discipline on Ms. Dawson: she was given a written warning that further incidents could result in her termination, and she was instructed to undergo training in antisemitism and leadership. When details about the case were conveyed to the Board of Regents, however, Regent Mark Bernstein intervened to overturn the administrators’ reasonable approach. [According to the New York Times](#), Regent Bernstein wrote to President Ono to say that the only acceptable outcome was for her to be “terminated immediately.” Shortly thereafter she was fired.

These facts lead us to question whether University personnel can expect the regular processes of investigation and discipline to carry weight in the face of the opinions of individual Regents. The consequences for our shared academic mission are profound.

With Ms. Dawson's example before us, it is difficult to see how untenured or contingent faculty would offer courses about controversial matters that are likely to arouse students' or Regents' indignation. With Ms. Dawson's example before us, it will be unreasonable for any of us to publish opinions that powerful figures in public life will object to. Our curriculum, our teaching, and our research will be more disengaged from the most controversial and most essential questions of our times.

We need safeguards against the removal of members of this University by regental fiat, particularly in these politically charged times. We urge the University's leaders to restore Ms. Dawson to her post, follow the ordinary process in dealing with staff disciplinary matters, and recommit itself to its fundamental mission: the education of an informed, politically critical citizenry.

Approved by SACUA on January 23, 2025

Response received by President Santa J. Ono on Friday January 24, 2025

Rebekah,

The University of Michigan has a long and proud history of promoting academic freedom and robust debate. Those are core values, and both are essential to our mission as a University.

The former employee's termination has nothing to do with those issues.

In this instance, the Provost terminated the former employee for two reasons. First, an independent investigation found that the available evidence indicated that she likely made anti-Semitic statements at a conference at which she was representing the University. This misconduct was incompatible with her job responsibilities, which included leading a multicultural office responsible for supporting all our students, including our Jewish community. Second, she exhibited unprofessional behavior and poor judgment at a campus protest. The Provost's final decision stands.

As stewards of this institution, we will always strive to uphold the University's core values. That is also true of the Board of Regents. Some members of our community may not agree with our decisions in human resources and personnel matters, and we respect their right of dissent. But we will do what is right, even when it may be unpopular to some.

As a University, we must – and we will – defend academic freedom. At the same time, we expect our University administrators, and other members of our community, to comply with their job responsibilities, to exercise reasonable judgment, and to respect all members of the University family.

Santa J. Ono  
President