

# Intellectual Freedom

## AUTHORITARIAN IN AN AGE

Ruth Ben-Ghiat

the 35th annual Davis, Markert, Nickerson lecture on academic and intellectual freedom

Nov. 6, 2025 4-5:30PM

with panelists

karima bennoune

ji yeon hong

ron suny

maize and blue auditorium, student activities building  
515 E. Jefferson Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109

email: [FacultySenateOffice@umich.edu](mailto:FacultySenateOffice@umich.edu)

event site with Zoom link: [myumi.ch/zwVAZ](https://myumi.ch/zwVAZ)



FACULTY SENATE  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

## Dedication

*The Faculty Senate is honored to welcome Simone Davis and Aaron Davis to this year's lecture. They are two of the children of Chandler Davis (one of the faculty for whom the lecture is named). A third child, Hannah Taieb, could not attend but is present in spirit. The Faculty Senate remains indebted to Chandler Davis, and to his colleagues Clement Markert and Mark Nickerson, and we are fortunate that Simone and Aaron Davis have graced us with their presence.*

# Statement on Freedom of Speech and Artistic Expression

**T**hank you for attending this program. The University of Michigan strives to create a truly open forum, one in which diverse opinions can be expressed and heard.

It is the right of the members of the University community, speakers, artists, and other invited guests to express their views and opinions at the University. We will protect the right of individuals to speak or perform, and the rights of those members of the University community who wish to hear and communicate with an invited speaker or artist.

Protesters also have a right to express their opposition to a speaker in appropriate ways, both within the confines of this building and outside the facility. However, protesters must not interfere unduly with communication between a speaker or artist and members of the audience.

If the hosts of this event or University representatives believe that protesters are interfering unduly with a speaker or performer's freedom of expression, those protesters will be warned. If the warnings are not heeded and the interference continues, then the individuals responsible may be removed from the building.

We reaffirm these policies in order to most fully protect the rights of free expression for speakers, and protesters alike, in accordance with Standard Practice Guide 601.01, Freedom of Speech and Artistic Expression.

# Statement on Academic Freedom

Academic freedom is the liberty that faculty members must have if they are to practice their scholarly profession in accordance with the norms of that profession. Academic freedom is not a term or a condition of employment; rather, it is based in the institutional structure of this and other universities and is fundamental to their common mission of promoting inquiry and advancing the sum of human knowledge and understanding. Although some aspects of academic freedom are also protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, academic freedom exists, independent of any external protection, as a basic prerequisite for universities to fulfill their mission to our society.

Academic freedom is most commonly vindicated by individual faculty members, but remains first and foremost a professional prerequisite of faculty members as a group.

Adopted by the Senate Assembly on Behalf of the Faculty Senate, January 25, 2010.  
Read the full statement at [https://facultysenate.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/01-25-10\\_Academic-Freedom.pdf](https://facultysenate.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/01-25-10_Academic-Freedom.pdf).

# Introductory Remarks

## **Derek Peterson**

*Chair, Faculty Senate*

Ali Mazrui Collegiate Professor of History and African Studies, Associate Chair, Department of History, Professor of History and Professor of Afroamerican and African Studies, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

## **Laurie McCauley**

*Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs*

William K and Mary Anne Najjar Professor of Periodontics, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Professor of Dentistry, Department of Periodontics and Oral Medicine, School of Dentistry and Professor of Pathology, Medical School

# Ruth Ben-Ghiat

## Keynote Speaker

Ruth Ben-Ghiat is Professor of History and Italian Studies at New York University. She writes about fascism, authoritarianism, propaganda, and the threats these present to democracies around the world.



Her most recent book, *Strongmen: Mussolini to the Present* (2020; paperback, 2021), looks at how illiberal leaders use propaganda, corruption, violence, and machismo, and how they can be defeated. She is the recipient of Guggenheim, Fulbright, and other fellowships, a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, and a 2023 Maggie and Dan Inouye Distinguished Chair of Democratic Ideals at the University of Hawai'i. She publishes *Lucid*, a Substack newsletter on threats to democracy in the U.S. and abroad.

Ben-Ghiat's insights into the authoritarian playbook and democracy protection have made her an expert source for television, radio, podcasts, and online events around the globe. She writes for *CNN*, *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Atlantic*. She is an MSNBC opinion columnist and frequently provides television commentary on that network. She has appeared in many documentaries about dictators and threats to democracy, such as Netflix's *How To Become a Tyrant* and PBS's *The Dictators' Playbook*.

Ben-Ghiat has turned her expertise into advisory work for Protect Democracy and corporations that must deal with challenging circumstances autocrats can create for business. She also serves as a historical consultant for film and television productions, most recently Guillermo del Toro's Oscar-winning *Pinocchio*, which is set in Fascist Italy.

She is an engaging speaker for university and college events, festivals, conferences, and professional associations in the U.S. and abroad.

# Lecture

## Intellectual Freedom in an Authoritarian Age

This talk examines how authoritarians seek to silence intellectuals and all those who work with fact-based research protocols and democratic models of pedagogy. Researchers, journalists, academics, and scientists become threats when political leaders seek to manufacture an alternate reality that helps them to consolidate power and remain in office indefinitely. Such leaders transform educational and other institutions into sites that encourage authoritarian values and behaviors, circulate lies and conspiracy theories, and silence areas of knowledge and practice that conflict with their ideological goals.

I will also look at how educational institutions have contributed to resistance to authoritarian states, and the role educators can play in reversing the collective syndrome of moral collapse that such states depend on.

The talk is based on my research, interviews with people who have been silenced by dictatorships, and my own experiences, such as being banned from delivering the 2024 Bancroft Lecture at the United States Naval Academy after a campaign by the Heritage Foundation and GOP members of Congress.

### **Ruth Ben-Ghiat**

Professor of History and Italian  
New York University

## Panel

### **Ruth Ben-Ghiat**

Professor of History and Italian  
New York University

### **Karima Bennoune**

Lewis M Simes Professor of Law and Professor of Law, Law School

### **Ji Yeon Hong**

Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies, Associate Professor of Political Science and Associate Professor in the International Institute, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

### **Ronald Grigor Suny**

William H Sewell, Jr Distinguished University Professor Emeritus of History, Professor Emeritus of History and Professor Emeritus of Political Science, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts

### **Derek Peterson, Moderator**

Faculty Senate Chair, Ali Mazrui Collegiate Professor of History and African Studies, Associate Chair, Department of History, Professor of History and Professor of Afroamerican and African Studies, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts.

# Book Launch

## *In the Spirit of H. Chandler Davis: Activism and the Struggle for Academic Freedom*

**Gary D. Krenz**

Director, retired, Judy and Stanley Frankel Detroit Observatory

### Remarks In Memorium of Chandler Davis

#### Introduction

*In the Spirit of H. Chandler Davis: Activism and the Struggle for Academic Freedom*, edited by Michael Atzmon, John Cheney-Lippold, Gary D. Krenz, and Melanie S. Tanielian (Disobedience Press, forthcoming)

The essays collected in this book honor H. Chandler Davis (1926-2022), a University of Michigan faculty member who became a symbol of principled dissent when suspended and fired in 1954 for refusing to testify about his political affiliations to the House Un-American Activities Committee. Invoking academic freedom and First Amendment protection, Davis was convicted of contempt of Congress. He served six months in prison before moving to Canada, where he established himself as a brilliant mathematician, prolific writer, and ardent and much beloved advocate for justice.

At a time when a new McCarthyism has come roaring back to threaten free inquiry everywhere, the 12 contributors to this book argue against censorship, the suppression of protest, the policed and surveilled campus, the self-silencing of “institutional neutrality,” and other enemies of academic freedom. Also included in this volume is posthumously published work by Davis and by his late wife, the historian Natalie Zemon Davis, which reflects on the importance of facing, and not accepting, authoritarian threats.

Inspired by Chandler Davis’ courage, integrity, and devotion to the struggle against oppression, injustice, and the persecution of speech, these essays offer crucial insights into the importance of defending intellectual independence, institutional autonomy, and the right to free expression.

## Senate Assembly Resolution

The faculty of the University of Michigan affirms that academic and intellectual freedom are fundamental values for a university in a free society. They form the foundation of the rights of free inquiry, free expression and free dissent that are necessary for the life of the university. The faculty recognizes that such rights are human creations, the product of both the reasoned actions and the deep-seated commitments of women and men. When such actions and commitments are set in human institutions, people may secure for themselves and for others, in the present and the future, the enjoyment of those rights.

We also recognize that these values and the rights they imply are vulnerable to the fads, fashions, social movements and mass fears that threaten to still dissent and to censure carriers of unpopular ideas. Such was the case in 1954 when the University of Michigan suspended three faculty members and subsequently dismissed two of them. We deeply regret the failure of the University community to protect the fundamental values of intellectual freedom at that time. It is to guard against a repetition of those events and to protect the fundamental freedoms of those who come after us that we make this resolution today.

The protection of academic and intellectual freedoms requires a constant reminder of their value and vulnerability. To provide for that reminder, the faculty of the University of Michigan hereby resolves to establish an Annual Senate Lecture on Academic and on Intellectual Freedom, to be named: The University of Michigan Senate's Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom.

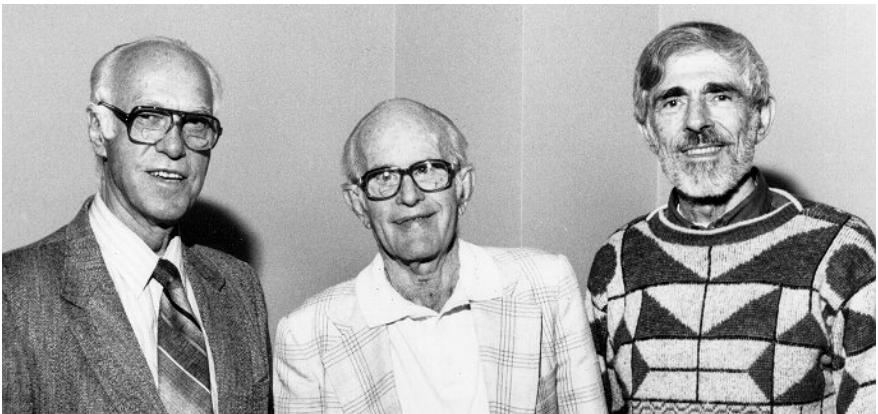
Adopted by the Senate Assembly on Behalf of the Faculty Senate, November 19, 1990.

## In Honor of Chandler Davis, Clement Markert, and Mark Nickerson

In 1954 the University of Michigan suspended three faculty members for their refusal to give testimony to the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities. Professors H. Chandler Davis (mathematics) and Mark Nickerson (pharmacology) were fired. The third faculty member, Clement Markert (biology), was retained but censured, and left the university soon afterwards. National AAUP censured the University for these terminations in 1957; censure was removed in 1958 after a new Regents' Bylaw 5.09 on the "Procedures in cases of Dismissal, Demotion, or Terminal Appointment" was adopted.

The University of Michigan Chapter of the AAUP contacted various University officials to encourage the Regents to take appropriate action to clear the faculty members' names. A proposal was sent to the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs in October 1989, and endorsed in February 1990.

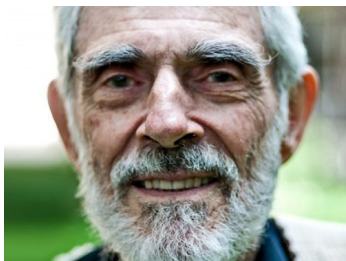
When it became clear that the Regents would not take action, the Senate Assembly in November, 1990, passed a resolution that deeply regretted "the failure of the University Community to protect the values of intellectual freedom" in 1954, and established the annual University of Michigan Senate Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom.



## H. Chandler Davis

1926-2022

H. Chandler Davis was well known as a science-fiction author in his youth. At the same time he was a mathematics student at Harvard, earning a Ph.D. in 1950.



He was an instructor at the University of Michigan, 1950-1954. In 1962, he achieved tenure at the University of Toronto. He was Vice-President of the American Mathematical Society (1991-1994). He also served as an editor of *The Mathematical Intelligencer*.

Professor Davis's scientific pursuits took him on many travels to Poland during the martial law of 1982; to both the USA and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam while those countries were at war; to China during the Cultural Revolution; to both Israel and the occupied West Bank. Often along with the scientific work he was able to stand up for free speech of scientists (some of whose speech he did not at all endorse).

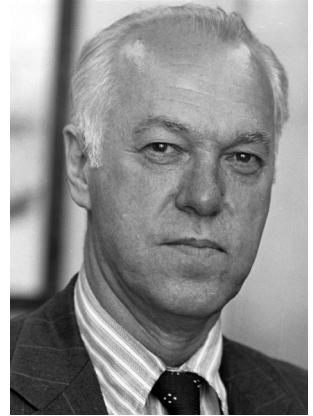
In 1954, while an instructor at the University of Michigan, Chandler Davis was called to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. His fellows on the stand in Lansing were his colleagues Mark Nickerson and Clement L. Markert, and his student friends Edward Shaffer and Myron E. Sharpe. All were "unfriendly witnesses, refusing to confess" their political dissent. Davis, unlike the others, based his refusal to answer only on the First Amendment, waiving his protection under the Fifth Amendment. Thereby he deliberately invited a citation for Contempt of Congress, so as to give him standing to argue in court that the Committee's proceedings were unconstitutional. He got the citation, all right, but he did not prevail in court; his appeals were exhausted in 1959 and he served prison time in 1960. Meanwhile, he and Professor Nickerson had been dismissed from their positions at the University. This action of the University administration drew censure from the American Association of University Professors.

He wrote about those days in "The Purge" (*A Century of Mathematics in America*, American Mathematical Society, 1989). A selection of his prose writings, not including his mathematics but including some science-fiction is *It Walks in Beauty* (ed. J.Lukin, Aqueduct Press, 2010).

# Clement L. Markert

1917-1999

Clement L. Markert was Professor of Biology at Johns Hopkins University (1957-1965), the Henry Ford II Professor of Biology and Chair of the Department of Biology at Yale University (1965-1986) and Distinguished University Research Professor of Animal Science and Genetics at North Carolina State University (1986-1993).



His research interests were focused on developmental genetics, reproductive biology, and biotechnology. He was a member of the National Academy of Sciences and served as co-chair of the Developmental Biology Interdisciplinary Cluster for President Ford's Biomedical Research Panel in 1975. Professor Markert was elected to the Presidency of the American Institute of Biological Sciences, the American Society of Zoologists, the Society for Developmental Biology, and the American Genetics Association.

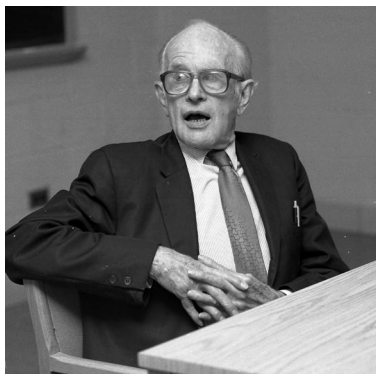
Markert began his academic career as an assistant professor of zoology at the University of Michigan in 1950 after earning his bachelor's degree from the University of Colorado, his M.A. from the University of California at Los Angeles and his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University. He died on October 1, 1999, in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

In 1954, Clement Markert was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He invoked Constitutional rights according to the Fifth Amendment and refused to answer the Committee's questions concerning his political associations. Consequently, he was suspended from the University of Michigan. He was later reinstated with the support of the Faculty Senate, his department and his college, and he eventually achieved tenure.

# Mark Nickerson

1916-1998

Professor Nickerson made major contributions to the field of pharmacology, in part through his seminal research on the adrenergic blocking drugs that are used to treat high blood pressure and other major medical disorders.



He was awarded the John Jacob Abel Award in Pharmacology in 1949 and served as president both of the Pharmacological Society of Canada and of the American Society for Pharmacology and Experimental Therapeutics. He chaired the Canadian Federation of Biological Sciences and was the author of more than 250 scientific publications.

In 1954, Mark Nickerson was an associate professor of pharmacology at the University of Michigan, with tenure. He was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee and chose to invoke the Fifth Amendment in response to the Committee's questions.

He was immediately suspended by the University as a result. Professor Nickerson's reinstatement was supported by the Faculty Senate but not by his departmental chairman or by the dean and the executive committee of the Medical School. He was subsequently dismissed from the University despite his tenured appointment.

Mark Nickerson was born on October 22, 1916, in Montevideo, Minnesota. He graduated summa cum laude from Linfield College, earned his Sc.M. from Brown University, his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University and an M.D. from the University of Utah. Nickerson married Elizabeth Ilene Smith (Betty). They had three children, Steven Paul, Michael Thomas and daughter, Marki.

# Past Lectures

- 1991**  
**Robert M. O'Neil**  
Professor of Law and Founding Director  
Thomas Jefferson Center for the Protection of Free Expression  
University of Virginia  
“Inaugural Lecture”
- 1992**  
**Lee C. Bollinger**  
Dean and Professor of Law  
University of Michigan Law School  
“The Open-Minded Soldier and the University”
- 1993**  
**Catharine R. Stimpson**  
University Professor and Dean of the Graduate School  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
“Dirty Minds, Dirty Bodies, Clean Speech”
- 1994**  
**Walter P. Metzger**  
Emeritus Professor of History  
Columbia University  
“A Walk Along the New Frontiers of Academic Freedom”
- 1995**  
**Linda Ray Pratt**  
Professor of English  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Past-President, AAUP  
“Academic Freedom and the Merits of Uncertainty”
- 1996**  
**Avern Cohn**  
United States District Judge  
Eastern District of Michigan  
“Academic Freedom: A Trial Judge’s View”
- 1997**  
**Roger Wood Wilkins**  
Clarence J. Robinson Professor of History and American Culture  
George Mason University  
“Opportunity and Academic Integrity”
- 1998**  
**Eugene L. Roberts, Jr.**  
Professor of Journalism  
University of Maryland-College Park  
“Free Speech, Free Press: Free Society”
- 1999**  
**David A. Hollinger**  
Chancellor’s Professor of History  
University of California at Berkeley  
“Universities and Cosmopolitanism”
- 2000**  
**Anthony Lewis**  
Journalist, *The New York Times*  
James Madison Visiting Professor  
Columbia University  
“Freedom: The Seamless Web”
- 2001**  
**Vartan Gregorian**  
President  
Carnegie Corporation of New York  
“Universities in the 21st Century: Perils, Challenges, and Prospects”
- 2002**  
**Catharine A. MacKinnon**  
Elizabeth A. Long Professor of Law  
University of Michigan Law School  
“From Powerlessness to Power: The Uses of Academic Freedom”

- 2003**  
**David D. Cole**  
 Professor of Law  
 Georgetown University Law Center  
 “Freedom and Terror: September 11th and the 21st Century Challenge”
- 2004**  
**Noam Chomsky**  
 Professor of Linguistics and Philosophy  
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
 “Illegal but Legitimate: A Dubious Doctrine for the Times”
- 2005**  
**Floyd Abrams**  
 Walter J. Brennan, Jr. Visiting Professor of First Amendment Law  
 Columbia University  
 Graduate School of Journalism  
 Partner, Cahill Gordon & Reindel  
 “Whose Academic Freedom?”
- 2006**  
**Bill Keller**  
 Executive Editor  
 The New York Times  
 “Editors in Chains: Secrets, Security and the Press”
- 2007**  
**Nadine Strossen**  
 Professor of Law  
 New York Law School  
 President of the American Civil Liberties Union  
 “Defending Freedom: Even for the Thoughts We Hate!”
- 2008**  
**Cass R. Sunstein**  
 Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law  
 Harvard Law School  
 “My University.com, My Government.com: Is the Internet Really a Blessing for Democracy?”
- 2009**  
**Philip Hamburger**  
 Maurice & Hilda Friedman Professor of Law,  
 Columbia University School of Law  
 “Galileo’s Ghost: Seventeenth-Century Censorship in Twenty-First-Century America”
- 2010**  
**Michael A. Olivas**  
 William B. Bates Distinguished Chair in Law  
 University of Houston Law Center  
 “God, Grades, and Sex: The Developing Law of the College Classroom”
- 2011**  
**Ellen W. Schrecker**  
 Professor of History  
 Yeshiva University  
 “The Lost Soul of Higher Education”
- 2012**  
**Robert C. Post**  
 Dean and Sol & Lillian Goldman Professor of Law  
 Yale Law School  
 “The Constitutional Meaning of Academic Freedom”
- 2013**  
**Marjorie Heins**  
 Founding Director of the Free Expression Policy Project  
 “Priests of Our Democracy: The Supreme Court, Academic Freedom and the Anti-Communist Purge”
- 2014**  
**Douglas Laycock**  
 Robert E. Scott Distinguished Professor of Law and Professor of Religious Studies  
 University of Virginia School of Law  
 “Religious Liberty and the Culture Wars”

- 2015**  
**Natalie Zemon**  
 Davis Henry & Charles Lea  
 Professor of History Emerita  
 Princeton University  
 Adjunct Professor of History  
 and Medieval Studies  
 Senior Fellow in the Centre for  
 Comparative Literature  
 University of Toronto
- “Experiencing Exclusion:  
 Scholarship in the Wake of  
 Inquisition”
- Joan Wallach Scott**  
 Professor Emerita  
 School of Social Science  
 Institute for Advanced Study  
 Adjunct Professor of History  
 Graduate Center  
 City University of New York
- “Civility and Academic  
 Freedom”
- 2016**  
**Marc Rotenberg**  
 President and CEO  
 Electronic Privacy Information  
 Center  
 Professor of Law  
 Georgetown Law
- “The Misunderstood Right to  
 be Forgotten: The Future of  
 Free Expression and Privacy in  
 the Online World”
- 2017**  
**Michael Mann**  
 Distinguished Professor of  
 Atmospheric Science  
 Pennsylvania State University
- “The Madhouse Effect:  
 Climate Change Denial in the  
 Age of Trump”
- 2018**  
**Gene Nicol**  
 Boyd Tinsley Distinguished  
 Professor  
 University of North Carolina
- “Academic Freedom: New  
 Politics, Old School Censorship  
 and Meaningful Constitutional  
 Review”
- 2019**  
**Hank F. Reichman**  
 Chair of AAUP Committee on  
 Academic Freedom and Tenure  
 Professor Emeritus of History,  
 California State University—East  
 Bay
- “Do Adjuncts Have Academic  
 Freedom? Why Tenure  
 Matters”
- 2020**  
**Nadje S. Al-Ali**  
 Robert Family Professor of  
 International Studies  
 Professor of Anthropology and  
 Middle East Studies  
 Brown University
- Susan Benesch**  
 Faculty Associate  
 Harvard University  
 Adjunct Professor  
 American University  
 Director, Dangerous Speech  
 Project
- Michael Bérubé**  
 Edwin Erle Sparks Professor of  
 Literature  
 Pennsylvania State University
- Melanie Tanielian**  
 Associate Professor  
 History, University of Michigan
- Panel Discussion:  
 “Challenges to Academic  
 Freedom in a Changing  
 Landscape, at Home and  
 Abroad”
- 2021**  
**Dima Khalidi**  
 Director  
 Palestine Legal
- “A New McCarthyism?  
 Academic Freedom and  
 Palestine”
- 2022**  
**Jamelle Bouie**  
 Columnist  
 New York Times  
 Political Analyst  
 CBS News
- “Revisiting Du Bois and ‘The  
 Propaganda of History’”

**2023**

**Jonathan Friedman**

Director, Free Expression and  
Education Programs  
PEN America

“Academic Freedom 2024:  
Educational Gag Orders, State  
Censorship, and the Fight for  
Higher Education”

**2024**

**Judith Butler**

Distinguished Professor in the  
Graduate School, University of  
California, Berkeley

“Academic Freedom in a Time  
of Destruction: Reconsidering  
Extra-Mural Speech”

**2025**

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat**

Professor of History and Italian,  
New York University

“Intellectual Freedom in an  
Authoritarian Age”

# **Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic Freedom Committee 2025-2026**

Craig Smith, Co-Chair

Nick Tobier, Co-Chair

Melanie Tanielian, SACUA Liaison

Michael Atzmon

Pauline Jones

Gretchen Keppel-Aleks

Brian Love

Kim Saks

Seda Saluk

Niloofar Sarlati

Basit Zafar

Margaret Peterman

Thandiwe-Kesi Robins

## **Hosted by:**

### **SACUA Members**

Derek Peterson, Chair

Soumya Rangarajan, Vice Chair

Jesse Capecelatro

Kirsten Herold

Vilma Mesa

Susan Najita

Heather O'Malley

Melanie Tanielian

Kentaro Toyama

Rogério Meireles Pinto, Senate Secretary

Rebekah Modrak, SACUA Immediate Past Chair

### **Faculty Senate Office**

Luke McCarthy, Director

Meaghan Blanchard

Ann Marshall

Eric Vandenberghe

## **Cover Design by:**

Rebekah Modrak, Professor of Art and Design

Penny W Stamps School of Art and Design