



FACULTY SENATE

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

From the Chair of the Faculty Senate

Dear colleagues:

In these past few weeks a number of American universities have put strict limits around what faculty can teach in their classrooms. [Texas A&M has banned core courses](#) that “advocate race or gender ideology, or topics related to sexual orientation or gender ideology.” At Texas Tech, teachers taking on gender or race in their courses [must seek the approval of the Board of Regents](#). In the state of Alabama [faculty are banned from teaching about “divisive concepts”](#) such as race or gender.

Michigan, thank heavens, is not Texas. The leadership of the University of Michigan has expressed no intention of putting rules such as these in place. The challenge we face here in Ann Arbor is more insidious. Many of us harbor worries that—if we take on a controversial subject in the classroom—our words might be spirited into the public domain and used to fuel internet-born outrage. Those of us who are not American citizens have particular cause for concern. An indignant student or, worse, an outraged parent can command the attention of the brokers of media and of the authorities in Washington, endangering the fragile legal standing on which our lives depend.

Faced with all of this, it would be easy to fold our tents and resolve to teach about safely mundane things. A survey that faculty government administered last year showed that a number of us were already carefully editing what we said in the classroom. I am sure that in this mid-winter a great many of us are making agonizing choices about what readings to assign, what topics to leave out, and what risks to take next semester.

If we—the faculty of the United States’ defining public university—do not teach controversial things, who will? The University recently launched its [“Look to Michigan” campaign](#), claiming that we will “redefine the power of education in the public interest.” Where else does the public interest lie, in these closing days of 2025, than in defending and expanding the creative space of free

thought? We cannot do the work of the bigots, the racists, the misogynists and the fascists for them. We cannot be our own censors.

At last weekend's Winter Commencement [I had a bare two minutes to offer the class of 2025 a few parting thoughts upon their graduation](#). I offered them a history lesson about the Michigan Class of 1861. In the winter of 1860, the fiery abolitionist Wendell Phillips announced that he intended to visit Ann Arbor to call for the abolition of slavery. Abolitionism was unpopular in this part of Michigan. Abolitionist preachers had been run out of Ann Arbor by students and citizens, who saw abolitionists as troublemakers, sowing division and inciting conflict.

So a week before Rev. Phillip's lecture, the [students of the University of Michigan's class of 1861 met in the chapel and agreed that—as they said —“Wendell Phillips and free speech must be protected.”](#) On the day of his lecture, 24 students arranged themselves outside the doors of the church where he was to speak. When Rev. Phillips arrived, there was a mob howling outside the building. But within the church—behind the protection afforded by the Class of 1861—Phillips' voice could be heard distinctly. He talked for two hours about the horrors of slavery. In the following months 1,800 UM students volunteered to fight in the Union Army. Three hundred of them died during the US Civil War. Alumni Hall—now the home of our art museum—was built in their memory.

The class of 1861 put their lives on the line to defend free speech and to advance the cause of justice. They would not allow the self-interest of the town's fathers or the indignation of their classmates to silence Rev. Phillip's voice. They knew that teaching and learning about difficult things takes courage. It also requires a sense of solidarity and a feeling of responsibility toward the common good.

It takes institutional backing, too, to do the risky work of teaching. Our [interim president has stood up for members of the faculty](#) whose public speech occasioned backlash from indignant conservatives. [The Provost's Office curates a website wherein resources for faculty facing doxxing can be found](#). In the coming semester, faculty government will be announcing additional efforts toward expanding the resources on offer to colleagues facing harassment.

As we head into the brief respite that Winter Break affords, I hope that we'll together find the courage to confirm our vocations as teachers, as custodians of

human knowledge and as architects of a more just world, willing to teach and learn around the most pressing, most contentious, most important subjects of our time.

Follow-up on University Senate motions

The [Faculty Senate vote of November broke records](#): more faculty voted than have ever before voted in our institution's history. In the weeks since the vote my colleagues and I have been working to bring the nine motions we adopted into effect. There are of course limits to what we can do: the Senate makes no policy, and the only power we possess is the power of persuasion. I've met with the leadership of the Board of Regents to lay out the motions and advocate around them; meanwhile, the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs [met with Regent Paul Brown in an open session](#) and will shortly meet with other regents, too. Here is where we have got to:

- The [Financial Affairs Advisory Committee](#) has been engaged with [Motion One, which asks the University to reverse the new policy for faculty travel](#). We are in ongoing dialogue with interim Executive Vice President Bobby Hewlett and others from his office, presenting faculty dissatisfaction with Collegiate Travel Planners and advocating for a reconsideration of the policy. EVP Hewlett has listened carefully to our concerns, and we are hopeful that further discussion will yield good results.
- [This week's announcement from the Department of Health and Human Services](#) makes it more difficult to advocate, as in [Motion Two, for the resumption of gender affirming care for people under 19](#). Nonetheless: the leadership of our [Medical Affairs Advisory Committee](#) and I recently met with Vice President David Miller to discuss the prospects and plot out a forward path. These discussions are sensitive, and they are ongoing.
- Many of us are overwhelmed by the pressures that Generative AI is placing on teaching and learning in our classrooms. In [response to Motion Four](#), the Provost and the Vice President for Information are putting together a faculty-led working group to focus on teaching and learning following the AI revolution. I look forward to working with the group to bring the concerns and ideas of aggravated faculty into focus.
- [Motion Six asks the University to afford us the necessary materials to remediate our teaching materials](#) in advance of the April 2026 deadline. Since the motion's passage the Vice President for Information has [made](#)

[available a newly expanded website with resources to help faculty manage the work themselves](#). It is not enough: remediating course materials is time-consuming and vexing, and it is silly to ask busy faculty to become, one by one, expert in the technicalities. We will continue to push around these matters.

- [Motion Seven highlights the injustice](#) that recent changes in the Statement of Student Rights and Responsibilities have done to our students. Our Student Relations Advisory Committee is in continuing discussions with the Vice President for Student Life about this matter. The SRAC is also looking into the ongoing (and badly conducted) prosecution of student protestors through the Office for Student Conflict Resolution. [Here is the Daily's summary](#) of our recent discussions around these matters.
- About [Motion Five](#)—which calls for the restoration of a widely popular unit offering statistical advice to faculty and students—I am sorry that I have little to report. The [Research Advisory Committee](#) will discuss the matter with the Vice President for Research at its January meeting. I continue to hope that this inexpensive part of the University's research apparatus can be brought back to life.

Next semester will soon be upon us, and I will write to you then with details about coming events in the Winter semester: more of our ['Political Speech in the Public Square' exercises](#) in free speech; more [Faculty Work Retreats](#) to foster collaboration and camaraderie; events to equip us all to deal with the controversies that will inevitably befall us in public life.

May we all have a very happy holiday and a prosperous New Year.

A luta continua,

Derek R. Peterson
Chair of the Faculty Senate

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