

Statement From Professor Derek Peterson¹

1. This statement is my own, acting in my individual capacity and not on behalf of the University, the Faculty Senate, or the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA).

With regard to the remarks I gave before the University of Michigan graduating class on 2 May 2026:

The President [has recently published a statement](#) claiming that I “deviated from the remarks [I] had shared before the ceremony.” My “remarks were expected to be congratulatory, not a platform for personal or political expression,” he writes.

I am obliged to begin this statement by correcting the record.

The text that I planned to deliver at the graduation ceremony was conveyed to the organizers a week in advance. I thereafter had a series of exchanges on telephone and over email with upper administrators regarding the sentence in which I mentioned pro-Palestinian activists. In dialogue with the administrators I agreed not to call Israel’s war in Gaza a “genocide,” even though a [2025 UN commission](#) found it to be so. In other words: the University was fully aware of the nature of the remarks that I intended to give, and I worked with administrators to ensure that the text was phrased as diplomatically as possible.

It is true, as President Grasso writes, that at the ceremony itself I “deviated” from the prepared remarks. But [these are the deviations of anyone who is accustomed to giving lectures before an audience of students](#). The essence of the text was unaltered. I did not surprise the administration by the substance of what I said, and neither did I substitute one speech for another. Anyone interested in this question may wish to scrutinize the text I submitted to the organizers, which can be found below.

To be clear: I am not a spokesman for the institution. As was indicated in the Commencement program, I was speaking as the Chair of the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs, not the University. It is an important distinction. The Chair of the Senate is not bound by the University’s recently-adopted policy on institutional neutrality. We [learned from hard experience during the McCarthy era](#) that academic freedom is a foundational pillar of higher education, and today we [annually honor those members of the Michigan faculty](#) who spoke forthrightly against the evils of their own time. In the words of American Association of University Professors, academic freedom “protects the right of a faculty member to speak freely when participating in institutional governance, as well as to speak freely as a citizen.”

It is now clear that the remarks I gave on 2 May have caused offence to some attendees, and I regret having occasioned unhappiness and anger on a happy day. In retrospect, I should have found a suitable way to acknowledge the personal trauma that some of our students experienced on 7 October 2023.

Again, I offer my congratulations to the University of Michigan Class of 2026.

Derek R. Peterson
7.v.2026

Remarks as Written and Submitted in Advance of Commencement

In 1858 a young woman named Sarah Burger applied for admission to the University of Michigan. In those days there were 450 students on campus. All of them were men.

Michigan president Henry Tappan was opposed to the admission of women. “When we attempt to disturb God’s order,” he wrote, “we produce monstrosities.”

So it must have taken courage for young Ms. Burger to make her application. She was by no means naïve. She was a suffragette, who at the age of 14 had attended a national conference on women’s rights in Cleveland.

Her application for admission to Michigan was received skeptically by the Regents. Allowing women into the University would “obliterate their refined and retiring delicacy,” advised the president of Rutgers. The Board of Regents voted unanimously against admitting Ms. Burger.

She was not deterred. She applied again in June 1859. The Regents again refused her application. Michigan did not admit women until 1870.

Today, as I speak, over 53 percent of the graduating class of 2026 is made up of women.

The point I want to make is that this and other freedoms were hard won. They were not handed out by a generous administration. This is the greatest public university in the world because people like Ms. Burger refused to accept the orthodoxies of their time. They saw in Michigan a promise: that this great university should actively place itself in the service of all the people of this great state.

The next time you sing Hail to the Victors, sing for Sarah Burger. Sing for the thousands of students who have devoted themselves to the pursuit of social justice.

Sing for Moritz Levi, professor of French, the first Jewish faculty member at the University of Michigan. Sing for the Black Action Movement, whose members demanded a curriculum that honored the experience of Black Americans. Sing for the student activists, who over these past few years have sacrificed much to open our hearts to the injustices happening in Gaza.

The greatness of this institution does not rest only on the shoulders of our student athletes. It rests on the courage and conviction of student activists who have pushed this university down the path toward justice.

Congratulations to all of you, and Go Blue.