



From the Chair of the Faculty Senate

Dear Faculty Senate Members,

It is a great honor to be elected to serve as your Faculty Senate Chair. I pledge to bring to the role all of the heart, mind, and will that I can muster. As this is my first monthly newsletter, some of it is self-introduction...

- **About me:** I'm tenured faculty at the School of Information in Ann Arbor, with a research focus in digital technology's impact on marginalized communities. I have engaged with faculty governance throughout my 11 years at the University of Michigan.
- **Gratitude:** I am deeply appreciative of the long line of students, staff, faculty, administrators, regents, donors, alumni, and others who have made UM what it is today.
- **My focus:** What I hope to prioritize as chair this year: (1) buttressing shared governance; (2) strengthening UM's ability to make ethically positive decisions; and (3) building our collective capacity for open, deliberative speech and expression.
- **Representation:** To support the above, it's important that, to the extent possible, the efforts of Faculty Senate bodies represent the whole of the Faculty Senate.
- **Your role:** Shared governance is a verb. Rules and elections are important, but active engagement is what makes for responsive governance. Please engage! toyama@umich.edu

Finally, I'd appreciate it if you could complete this very short survey about what you're satisfied with at UM and what you'd most like to see improved:

https://umich.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1Y5dINuKPhsr0h0

More details below.

Thank you!

Kentaro

Kentaro Toyama

Faculty Senate Chair

W. K. Kellogg Professor of Community Information

About me: My parents are Japanese physicians who came to the United States, right after I was born, to do residencies where they believed medical practice was at its best. Inspired by their scientific bent, but not interested in being “on call” on random weeknights, I did a PhD in computer science, in a subfield of AI known as computer vision. My first job was in the private sector, at Microsoft, where I [contributed](#) to research that led to the company’s Kinect system for Xbox; and I co-founded [Microsoft Research India](#) in Bangalore, where we sought applications of digital technology to support socio-economic development. Because of what I learned in India, I quit the company to write [a book](#) about how technology doesn’t solve persistent social problems. In 2015, I [joined](#) the University of Michigan School of Information in Ann Arbor.

Wanting to support the institution that hired me and eager to learn about how UM was run, I immediately signed up for a Senate Assembly committee. I checked the box for the “Academic Affairs Advisory Committee” (AAAC) because it was listed alphabetically first, and soon found myself in a group that met monthly with then-Provost Martha Pollack. She seemed open to discussion, transparent about her decision-making rationale, and genuinely curious about faculty perspectives, even when – perhaps especially when – we disagreed with her.

Gratitude: Since then, I have served alongside hundreds of faculty colleagues on a dozen Senate Assembly committees. I’ve interacted with 5 provosts, 4 presidents, many executive officers, and several regents, and I have learned a lot about UM’s history and the people who lead and manage our university. From the French seminarians involved in our founding; to the Anishinaabe peoples who ceded land for the university; from the many student activists who fought to broaden access; to the generations of staff and faculty who have built UM’s reputation program by program, paper by paper, there are many groups

and individuals whose legacies enable our work. I'm mindful, too, that great universities require resources, and that we all benefit from the efforts and generosity of our regents, donors, and alumni – past and present – who have supported UM with their time, money, and influence.

My focus: During my time as chair, I hope to focus on three things: First, strengthening shared governance, which is [defined and articulated](#) well by the American Association for University Professors (AAUP). Shared governance is the primary procedural concern of the Faculty Senate. It has waxed and waned at UM, but I'm optimistic that we can build on the momentum from the work of recent Senate Assembly chairs and committees and our current leadership's genuine willingness to engage with us, beginning with, but not limited to President Grasso and Provost McCauley.

Second, I'd like to nudge UM to lean further toward making ethically positive decisions. Any total accounting of our university's net harms and benefits is sure to lean very positive. But, the university does cause occasional harm, sometimes on individuals in the university community. Some of that harm seems to occur when finances, reputation, liability concerns, or external pressure are prioritized over our own [stated values](#) and individual rights. Of course, funding and reputation matter, but in the longer term, even those things depend on our acting on the right principles (see, e.g., [the Anderson case](#)). If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then the more we align with it, the brighter our future.

Third, I believe we need to build back our collective capacity for meaningful speech and deliberation, even as we protect the safety of every member of our community. As the top public university in what should be the world's greatest democracy, we have an obligation to model the rules and the culture of free expression. I was raised in public U.S. schools that hailed stories of the Boston Tea Party, Rosa Parks's bus ride, and the 1960s free speech movement, so I believe we should enable a robust range of expression on campus, even if mildly disruptive, so long as it avoids violence, threats, and harassment. Meanwhile, many of us are [afraid](#) to speak our minds or to teach certain content in a world eager to punish us for merely expressing opinions, partly because non-partisan defense of free expression has withered as a practice and a skill. I believe more of us need to vocally defend the right to speech, even when we disagree with it. I admit, I haven't always done this myself, but I plan to do so more consciously, and I hope many of you will join me.

I have discussed these priorities with this year's SACUA members, and they are generally supportive. Of course, we will also take up other issues over the year, as well.

Representation: My hope is to represent the whole of the Faculty Senate, with all of its diversity, as best as I can. There is, however, no single way to do this. For some matters, I can convey, e.g., that 63% believe X, 26% believe Y, and 11% believe Z. For some actions, the majority should be honored. For others, a minority may require attention. And for still other situations, I may go with my conscience, based on the mandate of an elected position. I don't believe there's a formula for the right approach, but on the more challenging questions, I will consult with my colleagues on SACUA and the Senate Assembly, as well as any who reach out.

Good representation also depends on good information about those represented. So, I hope to run very brief surveys with each newsletter to gauge faculty views. (These are not votes.) The first one is about your UM experience, specifically what you're satisfied with, and what you'd like to see improved. Please complete! https://umich.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_1Y5dINuKPhsr0h0

Your role: If you are receiving this email, you are a member of UM's Faculty Senate. (Exceptions: those whose appointment status has recently changed and might have been mistakenly included/excluded.) The Faculty Senate is stronger when more of us engage to make UM even better. Many of us participate in governance at the department and unit levels, but there are many additional options: If you have concerns or witness problems, especially (though not limited to) those that might have broader consequences beyond your department or unit, please let us know. Contact me at toyama@umich.edu (or kentaro_toyama@hotmail.com); or Vice Chair Kirsten Herold at fogh@umich.edu. Communicate with your [Senate Assembly](#) and [SACUA](#) representatives. Stay [informed](#). Come to Faculty Senate events such as the [DMN Lectures](#). Join para-curricular organizations such as the [AAUP](#) ([Ann Arbor](#), [Dearborn](#), [Flint](#)) or [Heterodox Academy](#). Volunteer for [Senate Assembly Committees](#) – the call comes out Winter term.

Finally, I encourage all of us to explore solutions to university-level problems in the small when we can, within our courses, labs, and departments. When you do, please let us (SACUA) know. The more we can point to successful solutions to the collective challenges we face, the stronger our case to request resources for broader implementation.

Thanks for reading! Future newsletters will introduce other SACUA members, provide background about Faculty Senate structures, and overview ongoing work.

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