



October 15, 2018

Mark S. Schlissel, President  
Martin A. Philbert, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs  
2074 Fleming Administration Building  
503 Thompson Street  
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109-1340

Dear President Schlissel and Provost Philbert,

We write today in our capacity as leaders of the American Political Science Association (APSA), a non-partisan scholarly association, representing more than 12,000 professors and students of political science worldwide, regarding the recent decision of a political science instructor to decline writing a recommendation letter for an undergraduate student due to the instructor's support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement. We strongly share the university's commitment to maintaining equitable and inclusive environments on campus, and we urge you to prioritize the principles of academic freedom as you clarify policies regarding instructors' expression of political thought and their responsibilities to students.

At most of the institutions where APSA members work, faculty members and instructors have some discretion regarding letters of recommendation. Although it is rare to have precise guidelines, faculty are usually expected to make reasonable efforts to assist students. The University of Michigan appears typical in this regard, and we support the university's efforts to provide more fully developed guidelines.

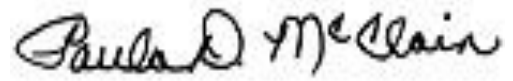
However, the university's strong statements and actions in the preceding weeks regarding a separate faculty member's similar decision raises serious concerns. Statements prior to this Fall did not specify that instructors would be sanctioned for supporting the BDS movement, or that sanctions could be exercised for declining to write letters of recommendation. Although the university certainly may expect that instructors will make reasonable efforts to aid students, strong sanctions without clear prior notice raise questions of procedural fairness. That the instructor we are concerned about is, in this case, also an early career graduate student only heightens our concerns that outsize sanctions may be imposed on one who could reasonably argue that the vague, unspecified, and changing norms regarding writing letters of recommendation were not adequately conveyed in advance. They also give at least the appearance of pressuring instructors to conform to the university's position on what the university has itself termed not only an issue of university values but also a matter of political belief. Imposition of an institution's political beliefs on its instructors undermines the core principles of academic freedom.

We believe the University of Michigan in fact shares with APSA a strong commitment to academic freedom. APSA strongly encourages the university to act with restraint as it initiates a commendable effort to clarify its policies in this regard.

Sincerely,



Rogers M. Smith, President



Paula D. McClain, President-Elect



Kathleen Thelen, Past-President



Steven Rathgeb Smith, Executive Director