

University of Michigan President Schlissel, who led unsafe reopening of campus, fired over sex scandal

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Late Saturday night, the University of Michigan Board of Regents fired President Mark Schlissel for “inappropriate conduct.” Following an internal investigation, Schlissel was removed for using his university email account to send messages to a subordinate with whom he had apparently been having a consensual relationship for several years.

The media has posted 118 pages of emails from Schlissel to a female university employee. The publication of the messages is a serious invasion of privacy. Schlissel has been transformed into a major criminal overnight. On what basis?

By and large, the emails are innocuous, to say the least. According to MLive, these were several of the “key” messages:

- On September 3, 2019, the individual appeared to invite Schlissel to an event for the University of Michigan Museum of Art. Schlissel told the woman that he was free and that “we should think of something to do thereafter,” according to the documents.
- On September 14, 2019, Schlissel sent the woman an itinerary for a flight to India and said, “What if we miss our connection and get stuck in Paris ...” The woman said, “I know a bistro,” to which Schlissel replied, “I’m so there.”
- In October 2019, Schlissel emailed the woman to tell her that he got a box of knishes as a gift. When the woman says she is familiar with knishes, Schlissel wrote, “I can lure you to visit with the promise of a knish?”

The emails also included *New Yorker* magazine articles, travel itineraries and tips, restaurant menus, credit card bills and one of Shakespeare’s sonnets. (Sonnet 73, “That time of year thou mayst in me behold.”)

The business is at the same time vile and absurd. This portion of the academic world, associated with the “Humanities,” has become saturated with subjectivism, vindictiveness and identity politics mania.

The Schlissel dismissal comes as over 1,900 university instructors and students continue to refuse to return to in-person instruction amid surging COVID-19 infections. Those involved are honoring an “e-pivot” pledge to continue remote learning for at least two weeks.

According to the Board of Regents, however, Schlissel’s

“inappropriate conduct” did not involve putting the lives and public health of tens of thousands of students, instructors and staff recklessly in danger by reopening classrooms and sporting events amid record Delta and Omicron variant COVID-19 surges. For that, the eight-person board in fact gave him a 3 percent raise as recently as September 23, bringing his annual salary up to \$927,000.

Nor was Schlissel removed for the now record number of COVID-19 infections taking place on campus, with over 1,600 positive cases officially listed on the university’s COVID-19 dashboard on January 8. This includes over 500 Michigan Medicine (formerly the University of Michigan Health System) health care workers, who were out with positive cases as of last week.

In fact, Schlissel gave an extensive interview on January 10 to the *Michigan Daily* in which he declared his support for a “let it rip” COVID-19 policy. Rejecting the demands of the “e-pivot” signers, he stated, “We expected to see large numbers of cases. ... Instead of counting the number of cases, I think what we’re really paying attention to is who’s really sick, who has to go to the hospital and how severe the illness is. I think it’s quite likely that most of us are going to get Omicron at some point. ... But the idea of preventing people from getting infected with COVID-19, I think the ship has sailed.”

In response to this essentially criminal declaration—in which he made clear that the risk of potential death or long-term illness was no reason to cancel classes or sporting events—no protest emerged from the Board of Regents.

Nor did the Board attempt to remove Schlissel when he threatened over 1,200 graduate student instructors with a legal injunction—which could possibly have led to jail time—in order to break their September 2020 strike for the right to a universal option for remote learning and other public health protections.

Nor were the Board members concerned with Schlissel’s refusal to protect the academic freedom and democratic rights of instructors, as in the case of Professor Bright Sheng this past semester. Sheng was denounced as a “racist” and pressured to step down from teaching his music composition course for screening the 1965 film adaptation of *Othello* that featured

Shakespearean actor Laurence Olivier in dark makeup.

Rather, Schlissel was removed in a sordid, petty sex scandal. An investigation was opened into his relationship with a subordinate after an anonymous December 8 complaint. It is not clear yet whether the anonymous complaint was submitted by the subordinate to whom he was sending his messages, leaving open the possibility that a third party made the complaint for reasons yet to be determined.

Schlissel made no declarations in defense of democratic rights during the Sheng affair, nor in other incidents such as the ouster of English Professor John Rubadeau in 2018. If he had taken a stand in defense of due process and opposition to the new McCarthyism, he would be in a stronger position today. There is a sense in which he has been hoisted with his own petard.

The official letter sent to Schlissel by the eight-person board—composed of Democratic and Republican Party functionaries, two of whom are connected to the wealthiest families in the state—declared that his use of the email account was “inconsistent with the dignity and reputation of the university.”

Within hours of the firing, messages were being sent out to the campus community by the institutional leadership about “combating sexual misconduct” and the need for a “respectful, inclusive and equitable working environment.” Apparently, such an “environment” will not tolerate private flirting but will accept the mass infection and possible deaths of thousands of women and men on campus!

Sex scandals have been utilized by the US political establishment to settle political and personal scores for decades. This has reached a fever pitch in recent years, driven by the Democratic Party-led #MeToo movement. Just last August the Democrats led a campaign to remove New York Governor Andrew Cuomo from office—not for deliberately covering up the deaths and infections of thousands in the state, including the deaths of a large section of 15,000 nursing home residents—but because of murky and unsubstantiated claims of sexual wrongdoing.

The Board of Regents that has ousted Schlissel is itself a nexus of individuals tied to Wall Street, the Democratic and Republican parties, the CIA, the Pentagon, the healthcare industry and various other corporate sectors generally associated with the “pandemic profiteers.”

Take Ron Weiser, for example, head of the Republican Party in the state of Michigan. Weiser is a billionaire who made his fortune as head of McKinley Properties, an apartment real estate company in Michigan and Florida, with annual revenue of over \$500 million. In the Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti area alone, he owns at least 18 different apartment complexes, rented out overwhelmingly by students, instructors and university staff. He has played a major role in keeping UM and nearby Eastern Michigan University open for in-person classes, ensuring students and instructors remain in his apartments.

Whatever the actual motives behind Schlissel’s removal, the official reasoning cannot be taken at face value. Early reports suggest that there is in-fighting between the wealthiest board members and school donors over who gets the biggest share of the spoils accruing from a real estate development project in Detroit, the \$300 million Detroit Center for Innovation.

But more critical to his removal is the growing opposition of students, instructors and staff on campus to the reckless in-person policies. A campus-wide meeting was called by several groups on campus for Monday night to discuss extending the “e-pivot” pledge not to continue remote learning, in defiance of Schlissel and Provost Susan Collins’ orders to teach all classes in-person.

There is undoubtedly a growing nervousness within the Board of Regents and the ruling elite more broadly over the growth of opposition to its policy of mass infection. It is very possible that Schlissel was fired, using the “sexual misconduct” and “inappropriate behavior” rationale, to divert anger away from the life-and-death crisis. It is critical that students, instructors and staff not be led into this political dead-end.

With Schlissel gone, the university administration intends to continue the same policy that he oversaw.

The ruling class “live with the virus” policy, overseen by the Biden administration and the Democratic Party, and supported by the Republicans and the far right, is drawing greater and greater opposition from students and instructors. Just last week, there were dozens of high school walkouts, teacher wildcat strikes, and similar “e-pivot” instructor refusals to return to in-person learning across the country, involving tens of thousands of workers and youth.

Also last week a joint meeting of the IYSSE at UM, with the Michigan and Chicago Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees, was held to begin organizing a concerted fight to broaden and connect the initiatives undertaken by both the UM students and instructors and the struggles of K-12 teachers, parents and students in Chicago and Michigan.

The next such meeting will be held this Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. EST, and we encourage all students, parent, staff, instructors and other workers to take part. Click here for registration and contact information.



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