

University of Michigan regents affirm commitment to free speech: The facts say otherwise

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On January 16, at a specially called public meeting, the eight-member Board of Regents of the University of Michigan (U-M) adopted a resolution affirming the university's commitment to "open inquiry and spirited debate." The meeting, which had not been previously announced on the regents' public schedule, lasted only 24 minutes. It followed by one day a symposium held by the university in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

At the symposium, U-M President Santa Ono's introductory remarks were interrupted by students in the audience demanding that Ono "drop the charges" against more than 40 students, who were arrested and banned for one year from entering the university's Ruthven administrative building, where public meetings of the regents are held. The ban is punishment for the students having staged a peaceful sit-in on November 17 to protest the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza. The protest was met with an outsized police presence, with the university calling out the police from 10 nearby communities.

At the MLK symposium, author and keynote speaker Michelle Alexander denounced the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Alexander's speech was cut from a video repost of the symposium's proceedings, allegedly at Alexander's request.

These events were not mentioned in the Board of Regents' resolution, titled "Principles on Diversity of Thought and Freedom of Expression," which was presented to the board by Ono. Nor did the regents' resolution mention the controversial events of late November and early December, when a referendum on a student government resolution condemning the genocide in Gaza was halted by the university administration and, subsequently, permanently disallowed by Ono—actions so egregious they evoked a strong public letter of protest, including a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request for internal university documents, from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Michigan. The ACLU letter condemned the university's suppression of student and faculty protest against the Israeli genocide and linked it to a nationwide "McCarthyite" attack on free speech on college campuses.

In the referendum, the student body was presented by the Central Student Government (CSG) with two competing resolutions. One was the anti-genocide resolution, which also called on the university to divest itself of investments in Israel-linked corporations. The other resolution was submitted by Zionist defenders of Israel and its genocidal campaign of ethnic cleansing in Gaza. It condemned the October 7, 2023 incursion into Israel by Hamas militants and justified the mass killing and starvation of innocent Palestinians as a legitimate exercise of the right to self-defense.

The anti-genocide resolution, backed by a coalition of over 60 campus organizations, evoked immediate hostility from right-wing and Zionist groups at U-M, which demanded that the vote be either delayed or canceled altogether. These groups cynically condemned the anti-genocide resolution as "antisemitic."

In actuality, they feared that the results would confirm the overwhelming student opposition to the mass murder in Gaza—a fear that was shared by the university administration and its billionaire corporate backers, military/intelligence interests and the Biden administration. The referendum vote was scheduled to take place online from November 28 through November 30, simultaneously with student government elections. The university allowed the referendum to go ahead as scheduled, and by mid-day on November 30 an unprecedented 10,000 ballots had been cast.

The International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) at U-M issued a leaflet and campaigned for a "yes" vote on the anti-genocide resolution.

It was at this point, on the afternoon of November 30, that U-M Vice President and General Counsel Timothy G. Lynch called a halt to the vote. That morning, a Zionist group had alleged that an email, distributed to all undergraduate students and promoting a "yes" vote on the anti-genocide resolution, had violated university procedural policy. The Zionist group also claimed that two students behind the email had "hijacked" students' email addresses. It posted photos of the two students online, labeling them and the referendum as "antisemitic" and calling for their expulsion from the university. This doxxing of the two students was a clear incitement to harassment and even violence.

Using the Zionists' accusations as a pretext, Lynch declared that the mass email had "irreparably tainted the voting process on the two resolutions" and that the university had "no choice" but to disallow the referendum and conceal the results of the vote.

The claim that the mass email violated university policy was soon exposed as a lie. University staff came forward to assert that they had approved and processed the email, and the Central Student Government (CSG) affirmed that the email had not violated any student government campaign rules. At this point, the university's rationale for stopping the vote had imploded. Logic and fairness would have required that the university either reinstate the vote and announce the results or allow a new vote. It did neither, and the outcome of the voting remains concealed.

Students were outraged at this authoritarian conduct. On December 1, hundreds of U-M students marched in the rain past the office of

President Ono. For its part, the coalition of student groups opposed to the genocide in Gaza drafted a resolution demanding a CSG investigation into the cancellation of the referendum and the doxxing of students by campus Zionists.

On December 5, in an email to the university community addressing these issues, Ono began by acknowledging that there was nothing improper about the campus-wide email sent by students supporting the anti-genocide resolution. He condemned false accusations against the two students who sent it, as well as “hateful intimidation and physical threats” against them.

In admitting that the two students’ mass email had not violated the rules, Ono negated the justification he and Lynch had used to deem the results “tainted” and halt the referendum. Nevertheless, he proceeded to permanently outlaw the Gaza referendum.

Citing “fears about safety and security on our campus” and claiming that the “proposed resolutions have done more to stoke fear, anger and animosity on our campus than they would ever accomplish as recommendations to the university,” Ono wrote:

After great thought and input, one significant step we are taking is to disallow any future votes on two controversial and divisive Central Student Government resolutions ... related to ongoing violence in Israel and Gaza.

Ono’s email, effectively ending freedom of political expression and speech at the University of Michigan, was co-signed by seven of the eight regents.

As the WSWs wrote after this announcement:

What is really behind the suppression of the anti-genocide resolution is the fact that it was headed for victory, something the billionaire donors and regents, Democratic and Republican politicians (from Biden on down), and Pentagon, CIA and State Department officials who collectively run the university would not allow.

This is the context for the Board of Regents’ issuance of its “Principles on Diversity of Thought and Freedom of Expression” statement. It is a boiler-plate recitation of clichés about academic freedom and free speech, such as: “Open inquiry and spirited debate—the lifeblood of the institution—promote discovery and creativity.”

At the end of the document, Ono and the Board of Regents stumble upon the heart of the question of free expression, and in the process directly contradict Ono’s stated reason for banning the Gaza referendum. In his December 5 email permanently banning a vote on the Gaza war, Ono wrote that the resolution had to be suppressed because it was “ripping our community apart, pitting one group against another...”

Yet the “Principles” document reads:

We recognize that free inquiry and expression can offend. Every member of our academic community should expect to confront ideas that differ from their own, however

uncomfortable those encounters may be. We commit to these Principles because they help us to create, discover, and fulfill our vital mission.

Ono’s December 5 email states the exact opposite. In that case, of course, the “uncomfortable” views cut across the global policy of war and counterrevolution of the American ruling class, including carrying out genocide as state policy. Free expression of such views does not sit well with regents such as Little Caesar Pizza billionaire Denise Illitch, Obama administration Homeland Security Secretary Jordan Acker, or two-time Michigan Republican Party Chairman and billionaire Ron Weiser, not to mention corporate donors to the university.

The 40 student protesters who were arrested on November 17 and barred from the Ruthven building were not even allowed to attend the regent’s public meeting, where the “Principles” statement was released.

In its FOIA request, the Michigan ACLU specifies that it seeks, among other information:

Any written or electronic communication received or sent after November 1, 2023 by staff/members of (1) the Office of the President, (2) the Office of the Vice President & General Counsel, and/or (3) the Board of Regents, regarding:

a. Student resolutions AR 13-025 and/or AR 13-026, including the decision to cancel and/or disallow voting on them;

b. The student elections that took place on November 28-30, 2023.

Contacted by this reporter on January 22 and asked what, if any, response the university had made to the FOIA request, a spokeswoman for the Michigan ACLU said she did not know, but that if she did she probably would not disclose that information.

It is incontrovertible that the adoption of the “Principles” resolution by the Board of Regents is an act of public relations damage control. It is equally incontrovertible that the University of Michigan—an institution tied by a thousand threads to the Biden administration, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the military—will continue its suppression of student speech on the subject of Gaza regardless of how loudly it proclaims its commitment to “diversity of thought and freedom of expression.”



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