

The Principles on Which We Stand

Aug 22, 2014 1:15 pm by Phyllis M. Wise

Dear Colleagues:

As you may be aware, Vice President Christophe Pierre and I wrote to Prof. Steven Salaita on Aug. 1, informing him of the university's decision not to recommend further action by the Board of Trustees concerning his potential appointment to the faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Since this decision, many of you have expressed your concern about its potential impact on academic freedom. I want to assure you in the strongest possible terms that all of us – my administration, the university administration and I – absolutely are committed to this bedrock principle. I began my career as a scientist challenging accepted ideas and pre-conceived notions, and I have continued during my career to invite and encourage such debates in all aspects of university life.

A pre-eminent university must always be a home for difficult discussions and for the teaching of diverse ideas. One of our core missions is to welcome and encourage differing perspectives. Robust – and even intense and provocative – debate and disagreement are deeply valued and critical to the success of our university.

As a university community, we also are committed to creating a welcoming environment for faculty and students alike to explore the most difficult, contentious and complex issues facing our society today. Our Inclusive Illinois initiative is based on the premise that education is a process that starts with our collective willingness to search for answers together – learning from each other in a respectful way that supports a diversity of worldviews, histories and cultural knowledge.

The decision regarding Prof. Salaita was not influenced in any way by his positions on the conflict in the Middle East nor his criticism of Israel. Our university is home to a wide diversity of opinions on issues of politics and foreign policy. Some of our faculty are critical of Israel, while others are strong supporters. These debates make us stronger as an institution and force advocates of all viewpoints to confront the arguments and perspectives offered by others. We are a university built on precisely this type of dialogue, discourse and debate.

What we cannot and will not tolerate at the University of Illinois are personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them. We have a particular duty to our students to ensure that they live in a community of scholarship that challenges their assumptions about the world but that also respects their rights as individuals.

As chancellor, it is my responsibility to ensure that all perspectives are welcome and that our discourse, regardless of subject matter or viewpoint, allows new concepts and differing points of view to be discussed in and outside the classroom in a scholarly, civil and productive manner.

A Jewish student, a Palestinian student, or any student of any faith or background must feel confident that personal views can be expressed and that philosophical disagreements with a faculty member can be debated in a civil, thoughtful and mutually respectful manner. Most important, every student must know that every instructor recognizes and values that student as a human being. If we have lost that, we have lost much more than our standing as a world-class institution of higher education.

As a member of the faculty, I firmly believe that a tenured faculty position at the University of Illinois is a tremendous honor and a unique privilege. Tenure also brings with it a heavy responsibility to continue the traditions of scholarship and civility upon which our university is built.

I am committed to working closely with you to identify how the campus administration can support our collective duty to inspire and facilitate thoughtful consideration of diverse opinions and discourse on challenging issues.

Sincerely,

Phyllis M. Wise