



**Middle
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October 22, 2018

Mark S. Schlissel, President
University of Michigan
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Martin A. Philbert, Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs
University of Michigan
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Dear President Schlissel and Provost Philbert:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our grave concern about the threat of “serious consequences” that you made in your joint [statement](#) dated 9 October 2018 against Lucy Peterson, a Graduate Student Instructor at the University of Michigan, because she rescinded an offer she had made to write a letter of recommendation for a student that would be used to support his application for a study-abroad program in Israel. We believe that the threat or imposition of disciplinary sanctions against Ms. Peterson for acting on the basis of her convictions and exercising her discretion as an instructor would be a distressing and dangerous violation of her academic freedom as well as of her constitutionally protected right of free speech.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2500 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

As we understand it, earlier this month Ms. Peterson informed a student to whom she had earlier agreed to provide a letter of recommendation that she was no longer willing to do so because she had become aware that the student would use the letter to apply to an academic program in Israel. She explained that her decision was based on her commitment to the boycott of Israeli academic institutions called for by the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, whose guidelines stipulate that “international faculty should not accept to write recommendations for students hoping to pursue studies in Israel....”

MESA has taken no formal position either for or against the BDS campaign, but in keeping with the principles of academic freedom and the right to free speech it is committed to vigorously defending the right of faculty and students to advocate for or against it. We would therefore regard any decision by the University of Michigan to impose disciplinary sanctions on Ms. Peterson as a violation of those principles and that right.

In your 9 October 2018 statement you asserted that Ms. Peterson’s action, and the similar action taken by Professor John Cheney-Lippold (addressed in our [letter](#) to Interim Dean Elizabeth R. Cole dated 16 October 2018), “interfere with our students’ opportunities, violate *their* academic freedom and betray our university’s educational mission.” We find these assertions unconvincing, if not tendentious. As you well know, providing a letter of recommendation is no guarantee of admission to any program; nor is it plausible to claim that Ms. Peterson’s decision violated the academic freedom of the student in question and betrayed the university’s educational mission. More broadly, we believe that it should be



entirely up to each member of the university's instructional staff to decide whether or not he or she wishes to write a letter of recommendation for a student, unless it can be clearly demonstrated that a refusal to do so was motivated by racial, ethnic, religious or gender bias.

We call your attention in this regard to "On the Relationship of Faculty Governance to Academic Freedom," issued in 1994 by the American Association of University Professors, which states that "[p]rotecting academic freedom on campus requires ensuring that a particular instance of faculty speech will be subject to discipline only where that speech violates some central principle of academic morality, as, for example, where it is found to be fraudulent (academic freedom does not protect plagiarism and deceit)." Ms. Peterson's decision not to write a letter of recommendation was entirely hers to make and certainly violated no principle of "academic morality"; nor did it contravene the University of Michigan's undefined "expectations" of its faculty to which your statement refers. We do not see it as acceptable for university leaders, administrators, or members of boards of trustees or of regents, to arrogate to themselves the right to define the boundaries of academic freedom, which is precisely what your statement and your threatened disciplinary action against Ms. Peterson do in this case.

We further note that article 601.01 of the University of Michigan's Standard Practice Guide, on freedom of speech and artistic expression, states that "Expression of diverse points of view is of the highest importance, not only for those who espouse a cause or position and then defend it, but also for those who hear and pass judgment on that defense. The belief that an opinion is pernicious, false, or in any other way detestable cannot be grounds for its suppression." Ms. Peterson clearly acted on the basis of sincerely held convictions about an issue of public concern, and your threat to impose disciplinary sanctions on her constitutes a clear violation of the letter and spirit of this article. It is moreover an infringement of her academic freedom and her right to free speech.

We therefore call on you to refrain from imposing, or threatening to impose, any disciplinary penalty on Ms. Peterson. We further call on you to publicly reaffirm the University of Michigan's commitment to respect, and vigorously protect, the academic freedom and free speech rights of all its instructional staff.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Judith E. Tucker', written over a horizontal line.

Judith E. Tucker
MESA President
Professor, Georgetown University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy W. Newhall', written in a cursive style.

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director