

Restoring Free Speech and Faculty Governance at the University of Illinois

The faculty of the Department of Geography & GIScience expresses its grave concerns around Chancellor Wise's withdrawal of an employment offer to Dr. Steven Salaita by the American Indian Studies Program. This action threatens free speech and faculty governance at the University of Illinois.

We uphold the principle of free speech and the passionate debate of ideas. Associate Chancellor for Public Affairs Robin Kaler's initial response to media queries regarding Professor Salaita's tweets on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the correct position to take and one the Chancellor, President, and Board of Trustees should have upheld. Kaler stated: "Faculty have a wide range of scholarly and political views, and we recognize the freedom-of-speech rights of all of our employees." Email communications uncovered by FOIA requests indicate that political interests played a role in Chancellor Wise's decision to reverse this position. We deplore the intrusion of non-academic considerations in setting university standards and policy.

We are most troubled by the procedure by which the Chancellor, President, and Board of Trustees decided to deny Dr. Salaita employment at the University of Illinois. University statutes give departments, colleges, and the Provost's office great responsibility in the hiring and promotion of its faculty. The scrupulous search and evaluation processes involve national searches, rigorous review of teaching, research, and service records, and multiple votes by duly constituted committees at the departmental, college, and campus levels. The committees at all three levels deemed Dr. Salaita to be the top candidate for the tenured faculty position.

The decision of the Chancellor, President, and Board of Trustees to rescind the employment offer to Dr. Salaita was made without consulting the faculty of the American Indian Studies Program or the Interim-Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. We find this arbitrary administrative practice to be intolerable and call for a public process to strengthen shared governance at the University of Illinois. The gravity of these issues compels us to object to this form of arbitrary administrative rule by voting no confidence in the Chancellor's, President's, and Board of Trustees' handling of the Salaita case.

The faculty deeply regrets that the national and international reputation of our great university has been badly tarnished by the administration's actions. In order to restore the faculty trust that is essential to university governance and to protect the freedom of academic inquiry, we implore the Chancellor, President, and Board of Trustees to reinstate the offer to Dr. Salaita.

*Approved by a strong majority of departmental faculty on September 10, 2014