



September 19, 2024

President Santa Ono; presoff@umich.edu

Provost Laurie McCauley; provost@umich.edu

Distinguished Members of the Board of Regents; regents@umich.edu

*Sent via email*

**RE: Institutional Statement Neutrality**

Dear President Ono, Provost McCauley, and distinguished members of the Board of Regents,

On behalf of Heterodox Academy (HxA), we write to express our agreement with the [September 2024 Report](#) of the Advisory Committee on the University of Michigan Principles on Diversity of Thought & Freedom of Expression (“the Advisory Committee”) and to urge University of Michigan to accept its recommendation to adopt a policy of institutional statement neutrality.

HxA is a nonpartisan, nonprofit membership organization of thousands of faculty, staff, and students advocating for policy and culture changes that ensure our universities are truth-seeking, knowledge-generating institutions grounded in open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement. In pursuit of these principles, our [growing membership](#) of faculty and students spans primarily North America, including on the University of Michigan’s campus.

In recent years, as our world and our campus communities have grappled with challenging and contentious issues, there has been tremendous pressure on institutional leaders to issue statements of support, opposition, solidarity, or concern. But such statements may actually hinder the academic freedom of students and faculty and chill their speech by implying that there is a campus orthodoxy.

As the University of Chicago [Kalven Report](#) astutely observed in 1967, when institutions of higher education are functioning properly, “[t]he instrument of dissent and criticism is the

individual faculty member or the individual student. The university is the home and sponsor of critics; it is not itself the critic.”

Indeed, as you likely know, a subcommittee of the Advisory Committee concluded:

The University of Michigan should adopt the Kalven Report’s heavy presumption against institutional statements on political and social issues of the day because it will advance the University’s mission and protect its longstanding commitment to diversity of thought and freedom of expression. The University’s status as a public institution and its commitment to developing leaders and citizens only strengthen the case for avoiding institutional statements on political and social issues.

The harm institutional statements may cause to the academic mission of the institution was laid bare by the Advisory Committee’s report:

Such institutional statements disserve the University’s mission. They undermine our commitment to open inquiry by suggesting that those who disagree are unwelcome. They cause would-be dissenters to worry that voicing disagreement may jeopardize admission, grades, or advancement. This risk is especially acute for statements issued by or on behalf of departments or other units that make up the University because of the closer connections among the individuals within those units.

Heterodox Academy agrees wholeheartedly with the Committee’s concerns.

Recognizing the divisive and chilling impact institutional statements can have, some schools have elected to take a more restrained and disciplined approach by implementing institutional statement neutrality on social and political issues unrelated to core academic matters or operations. Several University of Michigan peer institutions or their faculty Senates, such as [Harvard University](#), [Stanford University](#), [University of Wisconsin-Madison](#), and [University of Virginia](#), have [already adopted institutional neutrality policies](#), with more likely to follow.

Adopting a policy of institutional statement neutrality—wherein a university or academic institution refrains from taking official positions on contested social, political, or moral issues that do not directly affect its core academic mission—prevents the institution from being seen as endorsing controversial ideological stances. This protects the freedom of inquiry and expression within the academic community by ensuring all members of the University of Michigan community can freely research, teach, and discuss all sides of an issue without fear of ostracization and repercussions from the university itself.

**It is important to emphasize that an institutional statement neutrality policy does not inhibit individual faculty, staff, or students from expressing their views on controversial issues.** Rather, it ensures that the university, as an institution, remains an impartial forum for diverse perspectives by removing pressure to conform, freeing students and scholars to speak openly and conduct research unfettered by a real or perceived campus orthodoxy.

You will find the [Heterodox Academy Model of Statement Neutrality](#) strikes the right balance between maintaining institutional neutrality and upholding the university's commitment to empathy and support for its community. We strongly urge you to accept the Advisory Committee's recommendation to adopt a policy of institutional statement neutrality and offer our model as a guide as you consider doing so. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with you in further detail.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and for your continued leadership in making the University of Michigan a preeminent leader in higher education.

Respectfully,



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