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May 16, 2016

Dear Trustee:

We applaud your Administration for acting in a principled manner by sanctioning picketers who recently refused to vacate a University building after closing hours. In enforcing its student code of conduct, the University honored students' right to free expression while making clear that disruptive actions would not be tolerated.

However, we write to you now since the University is faced with a new challenge to its code of conduct and its policies on free expression.

On April 25, a student group hosted an event in Bowker Auditorium entitled, "The Triggering: Has Political Correctness Gone Too Far?" Based on media reports and videos circulated widely on the Internet, speakers at the event—billed as a discussion of free speech issues—were met with near-constant interruptions, shouts, and jeers.

The University of Massachusetts–Amherst Picketing Code provides that: "No student shall intentionally and substantially interfere with the freedom of expression of another person on university premises or at university sponsored activities." Violation of this code comes with the possible threat of expulsion.

In furtherance of this policy, we urge you to call upon your president to ensure a thorough investigation identifies students whose actions violated these policies, and to make clear to students and faculty that existing sanctions will be applied, as appropriate, for disruptions that violate the University community's values.

Universities understandably struggle with enforcement of their rules against disruption and the "heckler's veto." However, sanctions must be imposed appropriately if they are to work as a deterrent to subsequent disruptions. In taking such a stand for free expression and the rule of law, you, as fiduciaries, will establish the University of Massachusetts–Amherst as a leader among colleges in promoting free and open inquiry.

PROMOTING ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND EXCELLENCE

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We also urge you again, as we did in an earlier letter, formally to adopt the principles of the University of Chicago's 2014 Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression (enclosed), which Princeton, Winston-Salem, Purdue, and Chapman have already done. Johns Hopkins, American University, and the University of Wisconsin System have adopted similar policies affirming the value of free speech. Among the Chicago principles is the following:

The University's fundamental commitment is to the principle that debate or deliberation may not be suppressed because the ideas put forth are thought by some or even by most members of the University community to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. . . . Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the University community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the University's educational mission.

We look forward to hearing how you will proceed, and we thank you for your service to American higher education.

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Anne D. Neal", with a stylized, flowing script.

Anne D. Neal
President

Enclosure