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May 29, 2025

Dear Members of the State University System of Florida Board of Governors:

I write to you today to share serious concerns regarding the State University System of Florida’s upcoming consideration of Santa Ono’s appointment as the next president of the University of Florida.

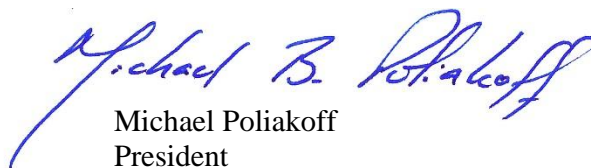
As you are aware, selecting the chief executive officer of a higher education institution is a board’s most important responsibility. The decision you make will have great bearing on the strategic direction of the university.

With that in mind, I encourage you to read the enclosed article published in *RealClear Education*. It highlights the weighty questions surrounding Dr. Ono’s history of vigorously promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, as well as his sudden about-face on the issue.

I urge you to take great care in considering Dr. Ono’s appointment. If you would like to discuss this further, please reach out to me at **(202) 467-6787** or **mpoliakoff@GoACTA.org**.

Thank you for your commitment to higher education.

With highest regards,



Michael Poliakoff
President

Enclosure

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By: Michael Poliakoff | May 27, 2025

University of Florida Trustees: The Whole World Is Watching

The University of Florida must not make a mistake in hiring the president who will replace Ben Sasse. To do so could destroy one of the crown jewels of American higher education, a model of excellence and the plain common sense so sorely lacking on campus. The haste with which the Gator trustees will vote upon their sole finalist, Santa Ono, and the Board of Governors will make final their decision is ill-advised. There are cases in which the presentation of a sole finalist to the board ends successfully, but it is a risky procedure. When controversy over a candidate's record emerges, especially the type of controversy that swirls around Dr. Ono, prudent and unhurried review is what is owed to the citizens of Florida.

Relying on the guidance of a search firm is to lean upon a broken reed. There are too many examples of bad search firm guidance from even well-known and high-profile firms to allow any level of complacency. Indeed, the organization I lead, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), has for decades counseled trustees to take individual responsibility to be informed and engaged throughout the process of selecting a new president: it is arguably the most important decision they will make in their fiduciary role. The search firm that helped select Dr. Ono as a finalist will emerge unscathed if it turns out to be a bad choice: trustees, who bear ultimate responsibility for the school they govern, will not escape, nor should they escape blame. Doing it right is

their solemn responsibility.

On May 4, to the accolades of the UF board chair, UF announced that the search committee had chosen Dr. Ono, currently the president of the University of Michigan as its sole finalist. The intention of the UF board of trustees is to vote on the appointment on May 27. The Board of Governors will meet soon thereafter. This is a remarkably accelerated schedule under all circumstances. But these are not ordinary circumstances.

Dr. Ono's academic credentials are distinguished, but so are his credentials for enthusiastic and energetic support for DEI, at least until quite recently. Who is the real Dr. Santa Ono?

Dr. Peter Wood, president of the National Association of Scholars, has argued that "Mr. Ono is one of the primary authors of the DEI playbook in higher education." He reports that a 2021 President's Task Force on Anti-Racism and Inclusive Excellence created by Dr. Ono while he led the University of British Columbia explicitly called for "preferential" race-based hiring of faculty, the establishment of a "Black student application program" for prospective medical students, a "zero-tolerance policy" for faculty and staff who resisted DEI re-education, and mandatory training for students and faculty on "colonialism, anti-racism, decolonization and intersectionality."

Those who have lived on woke, "zero-tolerance" campuses with their forced re-education, kangaroo courts, cancellations, and punishment for

non-compliance will know what these words mean.

Dr. Ono's past bespeaks, not a reluctant, compelled compliance with DEI, but enthusiastic embrace – and enforcement. As president of the University of British Columbia, he inveighed against "systemic racism" and the "tools of oppression and white supremacy that remain prevalent and entrenched in our everyday systems." In his inaugural address at the University of Michigan in March 2023, he described quite glowingly his plan for DEI 2.0. These are just a few examples from his long history of statements supporting DEI – a history which suggests that Dr. Ono's departure from DEI is based on convenience, rather than a true change of heart and mind. The mystery will remain whether his late-in-the-game actions to roll back the University of Michigan's sprawling DEI empire came because of a mortifying October 2024 *New York Times* exposé and, arguably, being poked by UM's excellent and engaged Board of Regents into action.

The question for the UF trustees and the Board of Governors is whether Dr. Ono lost his belief in DEI on the Road to Damascus or on the road to the University of Florida. The trustees have a duty to determine whether Dr. Ono can be trusted to lead Florida's flagship to greatness, and they should take all the time they need to do it.

A final word: the University of Florida is no ordinary university. Its power in technology transfer earned it a rating of 2nd in the nation, right behind Carnegie Mellon (University

of Michigan ranked 16th). It is home to the Hamilton School of Classical and Civic Education, which has drawn to Florida great scholars such as Walter Russel Mead and Allen Guelzo, as well as the support of important programs such as the Tikvah Fund and the Rosenthal-Levy Scholars Program. It firmly addressed the corrosive effects of DEI and avoided the anti-Israel chaos we saw on many other campuses (including Dr. Ono's University of Michigan, which had an encampment for only one day less than Columbia University).

These successes do not happen by chance, nor do they survive uncommitted university leadership. Set side by side the words of Ben Sasse, "We're a university, not a daycare. We don't coddle emotions, we wrestle with ideas," with the UM Diversity 2.0 plan (now removed from the UM website) that Dr. Ono celebrated two years ago, in his UM inaugural address.

Making the final hiring decision for the University of Florida must not be a snap decision. There is too much that is too precious to risk.