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January 20, 2016

Dear Trustee:

The recent turmoil seen on so many college campuses across the nation challenges the trustees of colleges and universities to safeguard academic freedom. The public looks to trustees to ensure that their institutions do not permit censorship or intimidation to be acceptable means of persuasion on their campuses. And there are important steps, described below, that some schools are now taking proactively to foster freedom of thought and inquiry.

Intervention is urgently needed. Recent events demonstrate how students—and even some faculty—are becoming increasingly willing to suppress the beliefs of others when they deem those opinions to cause students to feel “uncomfortable” or “unsafe.” At Yale, student backlash led to the resignation of a distinguished lecturer, targeted simply for writing an e-mail challenging the university’s intervention into students’ choice of Halloween costumes that might be perceived as culturally insensitive. Wesleyan University’s student government took steps toward defunding its newspaper after it published an editorial criticizing the strategy—though not the merits—of the Black Lives Matter movement. And after a student journalist at the University of Missouri was manhandled at the instigation of a communications professor for attempting to photograph a campus demonstration, a student-body leader laid blame upon the First Amendment for creating “a hostile and unsafe learning environment” on campus.

Racism and prejudice have been cancers within American society, and their consequences must be addressed. The American university should rightly be at the forefront of that discussion—as a place where reasoned debate is possible about these profound challenges to individual liberty and dignity.

But too many colleges and universities have been willing to capitulate to strong-arm tactics that undermine the pursuit of truth, especially when it comes to the most difficult and controversial subjects of the day.

PROMOTING ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND EXCELLENCE

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Fortunately, several major institutions have embraced best practices in maintaining academic freedom. Last year, Princeton became the first institution to endorse the principles of the University of Chicago's 2014 Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression, a move later adopted by the boards of Purdue University and Chapman University. Johns Hopkins and the University of Wisconsin System have adopted similar policies affirming the value of free speech.

We urge your board to adopt the Chicago principles (enclosed) and to ensure that course catalogs include a statement upholding the value of the free exchange of ideas. The board should also look toward convocations and commencements as opportunities for university leadership to reiterate and expound these core principles of American higher education.

Thank you for your service in higher education. I look forward to hearing from you.

Warm regards,



Anne D. Neal
President

Enclosure