



November 15, 2021

Dear President Mark Schlissel,

The Academic Freedom Alliance (AFA) is a coalition of faculty members from across the country and across the ideological spectrum who are committed to upholding the principles of academic freedom and professorial free speech.

We wrote to the university on [October 18](#) to condemn the treatment of Professor Bright Sheng, who was partly suspended from his teaching duties and threatened with further disciplinary action as a result of student complaints of his showing a film of *Othello* featuring Laurence Olivier wearing dark makeup to play the Moorish character. Although the university eventually dropped the investigation, it has even to this day failed to clearly recognize that Professor Sheng's actions were fully protected by academic freedom, that he should never have been suspended from teaching his class, and that he should never have been subjected to an extended threat of an investigation. [Your own public comments](#) on the matter go no further than to characterize the controversy as a "learning experience" in which Professor Sheng made an "error" while minimizing what happened to Professor Sheng and the chilling message that the administration's actions has sent to the faculty. It is hardly reassuring that the university can do little better to affirm its commitment to academic freedom than to note that these are "[complex issues](#)."

I write on behalf of the Academic Freedom Alliance in response to the [open letter of November 4](#) signed by some members of the faculty on "anti-racist practice" at the university. The letter's suggestion about how the university should move forward from this incident is deeply incompatible with any meaningful understanding of academic freedom and should be firmly rejected.

The open letter disingenuously asserts that there was no "free speech issue" when a professor was removed from the classroom and subjected to an investigation because of the course material he chose to use in his class. It repeats the disturbing claim that showing an educationally relevant film in a university course not only "create[s] a hostile learning environment" but "normalizes racism" and is itself a "racist" act, even if one "without intent" or "personal bias." It is obvious that such a framing is designed precisely to enlist the disciplinary arm of the university into a campaign of suppressing speech with which the signatories disagree.

The letter's policy proposals would run roughshod over the academic freedom to which the University of Michigan has long been committed and to which any serious



institution of higher education in the United States must be committed. In particular, the letter abandons any pretense of caring about intellectual freedom when it proposes that all members of the faculty be subjected to mandatory “anti-racism training” so that the faculty can be indoctrinated into the substantive beliefs held by the letter writers. Intellectual freedom is also disregarded if the university accedes to their demands that the presentation of course materials to students without the “context” and “purpose” that the letter writers would themselves prefer be treated as “irresponsible pedagogy” that is presumably outside the bounds of academic freedom protections and thus vulnerable to official sanction.

Quite simply, the letter is proposing that the university adopt an ideological litmus test against which faculty should be measured. Academic freedom protects the ability to scholars and instructors to disagree about the subject matter over which they have disciplinary expertise. Professor Sheng is free to introduce instructionally relevant material for the purpose that he sees fit and with the context that in his scholarly judgment the material demands. It is entirely incompatible with academic freedom to suggest that the university administration should declare some scholarly and pedagogical choices beyond the pale and demand that all faculty on campus conform to the orthodoxies that some members of the faculty would prefer. Some faculty might well prefer to teach using an anti-racist lens, but no serious university should declare that all members of the faculty must do so.

It is not hard to imagine the abuses that could follow from the university going down this path. Rather than being a campus on which scholars can freely debate controversial issues and challenge prevailing wisdom, this proposal seeks to stifle debate, suppress dissent, and insist that every member of the faculty must adopt and teach the same ideas. If the university can declare the teaching of disfavored ideas to be “irresponsible” and tantamount to creating a “hostile learning environment,” then there is no reason why the list of officially sanctioned dogmas cannot be expanded. State legislatures across the country are currently debating whether some “divisive concepts” should be banned from classrooms lest some students draw the wrong conclusions from being exposed to them. If the university begins to carve out exceptions to academic freedom, it can expect the exceptions to grow and expand over time.

We do agree with the letter writers on one point, however. We too think the university would be well-served by developing “clear protocols in the event that a student reports a racist incident.” As you recently noted, the decision to remove Professor Sheng from the classroom was “made locally” by a dean who did not have the benefit of such a clear protocol. The university should take steps to ensure that such a violation of academic freedom does not happen again. It seems evident that many department chairs, deans and university administrators do not understand what is protected by academic freedom. Future violations of academic freedom can be avoided if those administrators had a better understanding of how teaching and scholarship is protected from administrative interference. The university should



make clear to administrators who might receive such a complaint in the future that it should immediately be dismissed the moment it becomes evident that such a complaint is merely objecting to the educationally relevant, substantive content of a course.

This episode is indeed a learning opportunity. It is an opportunity for the university to learn that its protections for academic freedom are inadequate and that intellectual freedom at the university needs to be better secured.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "KW", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Keith Whittington
Chair, Academic Committee, Academic Freedom Alliance
William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Princeton University

cc. Provost Susan M. Collins
Vice Provost Rob Sellers
Vice President and General Counsel Timothy Lynch
Vice President and Secretary of the University Sally Churchill