
Dean's letter - Social Work

1 message

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To: Valeria Bertacco <valeria@umich.edu>

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Posted on our SSW Forum

Dear SSW Community,

It has been an agonizing few weeks as the war in Israel and Gaza has escalated, as we learn about the mounting death toll, the continuing captivity of Israeli hostages, and the denial and limitation of basic services to Palestinians threatening the entire population of the Gaza Strip. As you are aware, college campuses, including our own, have been a site of activism and polarization, exacerbating the pain many are feeling about the war and the worsening humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Our SSW community has been affected by this division as well, and I have heard from many of you that navigating interactions inside and outside the classroom has been at times challenging, frightening, and hurtful.

Some in our community have expressed they are fearful of being targeted or punished for the expression of their viewpoints, whether in the classroom or other spaces within the School and University. These students have cited in particular their concerns about troubling incidents of Islamophobia, antisemitism, anti-Arab hate and doxxing of students and faculty on college campuses around the United States, including here on our campus. They have also stated that they are concerned that their instructors are vulnerable to being adversely targeted.

I am sending this message to reaffirm the School's commitment to free expression, which aligns with [that of the University of Michigan](#). We believe in creating an inclusive space where individuals feel empowered to express their opinions and engage in constructive dialogue. Speaking out and demonstrating peacefully, based on one's views, and doing so in a way that comports with the law and university policy, is permitted and will not result in sanctions such as loss of employment, demotion, lowering of compensation, loss of position in school organizations, suspension or expulsion, or retaliation in grading.

It is important to note that while speech is protected, unlawful behavior and violation of University and School policies are not and can result in disciplinary [sanctions](#) and/or legal action. Protected speech also may result in other kinds of interpersonal consequences that the School or University cannot control. One such consequence is the harm associated with certain language used to express viewpoints that, depending on one's perspective, may be considered hate speech. This is why, in previous messages, we have stressed the importance of listening and respectful dialogue. Our challenge as social workers is to engage in uncomfortable conversations in a way that allows one another to exercise compassion and confront difficult truths and differences in perspective.

It is disheartening to know that members of our community are feeling a lack of personal and psychological safety on top of our shared grief and horror related to the unfolding tragedy in the Middle East. As noted in the [University's recent communication](#), safety is a paramount priority and a variety of resources are available for reporting immediate danger, experiences of bias, or psychological distress. Here in the School, we have embedded CAPS support available for students seeking psychological safety as well.

The School of Social Work is dedicated to upholding the values of free speech, critical thinking, and social justice within the academic setting. In the spirit of fostering understanding, empathy and social change, we encourage respectful and informed discussions, recognizing the diversity of perspectives that contribute to a compassionate academic environment.

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"We acknowledge that The University of Michigan, named for Michigami, the world's largest freshwater system and located in the Huron River watershed, was formed and has grown through connections with the land stewarded by Niswi Ishkodewan Anishinaabeg: The Three Fires People who are the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi along with their neighbors the Seneca, Delaware, Shawnee and Wyandot nations."

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