

A statement by the University re Steven Salaita complaint

University to vigorously defend against meritless claims

January 29, 2015

The University of Illinois must balance all of the interests of its campuses and the institution in reaching any decision, particularly one as important as granting a position as a member of our faculty.

Last summer, while Steven Salaita was still under consideration for a tenured position to teach courses comparing issues related to the experiences of Native Americans to issues related to Palestinians and the Middle East, Dr. Salaita began demonstrating that he lacked the professional fitness to serve on the faculty of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Specifically, Dr. Salaita began making a series of statements via social media on precisely the subject matter that he proposed to teach at our University. For example, on June 19, 2014, after three Israeli teenagers were reported kidnapped and presumed dead, Dr. Salaita posted a statement on Twitter which read: "You may be too refined to say it, but I'm not: I wish all the f**king West Bank settlers would go missing." Dr. Salaita continued to post this comment even after the three teens were found murdered later that month.

Dr. Salaita also posted statements such as:

"Zionist uplift in America: every little Jewish boy and girl can grow up to be the leader of a monstrous colonial regime."

"If #Israel affirms life, then why do so many Zionists celebrate the slaughter of children? What's that? Oh, I see JEWISH life."

"Zionists: transforming antisemitism [sic] from something horrible into something honorable since 1948."

"Let's cut to the chase: If you're defending #Israel right now you're an awful human being."

These statements and many more like them demonstrate that Dr. Salaita lacks the judgment, temperament and thoughtfulness to serve as a member of our faculty in any capacity, but particularly to teach courses related to the Middle East.

As Dr. Salaita admits in the complaint he filed today, the offer he received in October 2013 from the American Indian Studies Program was at all times subject to the ultimate approval of the Board of Trustees. This is consistent with the Statutes of the University of Illinois and the past precedent of the University. Dr. Salaita was well aware of the importance of this final approval. At no time was Dr. Salaita hired as a faculty member. His appointment was always subject to approval by the Board of Trustees.

On September 11, 2014, after carefully considering all of the issues related to Dr. Salaita's proposed appointment, the Board of Trustees voted 8-1 not to approve Dr. Salaita for a position on the faculty. Two weeks ago, the Board emphatically reiterated that its decision is final and will not be reconsidered.

The Board's decision concerning Dr. Salaita was not reached hastily. Nor was it the result of external pressures. Indeed, the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure concurred that "donor influence" was not a basis for the decision. The decision did not present a "new approach" to the consideration of proposed faculty appointments. It represented the careful exercise of each Board member's fiduciary duty and a balancing of all of the interests of the University of Illinois. In the end, this is a responsibility that cannot be delegated nor abdicated.

Today, Dr. Salaita has filed a complaint in federal court. Among other accusations, he contends that the individual trustees and administrators of the University of Illinois are liable for intentionally inflicting emotional distress by refusing to provide him with a faculty position. The University of Illinois intends to vigorously defend against these and each of Dr. Salaita's other meritless claims. The University has attempted to negotiate a settlement for his reasonable losses and expenses, but he has refused those offers.

As a private citizen, Dr. Salaita has the constitutional right to make any public statement he chooses. Dr. Salaita, however, does not have a constitutional right to a faculty position at the University of Illinois.