

Threat to Academic Freedom of Michigan's Public Universities

Posted on April 17, 2012 by Rosemary Feurer

LAWCHA members and labor activists around the country are uniting against a recently proposed legislative ban on Michigan universities collaborating with a worker center. Read on for information on what you can do to stop it.

When the Michigan legislature returns from recess next week, it will be voting on appropriations for state colleges and universities. Recently, the following language was added to the higher education appropriations bill:

Sec. 273a. *It is the intent of the legislature that a public university that receives funds in section 236 shall not collaborate in any manner with a nonprofit worker center whose documented activities include coercion through protest, demonstration, or organization against a Michigan business.*

As described in a recent front-page story in the Lansing State Journal, this disturbing language seems to have been the result of a field placement by a University of Michigan social work student with the Restaurant Opportunities Center of Michigan (ROC-Michigan). ROC is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving working conditions and opportunities for advancement in the restaurant industry. Among many other projects furthering fair and effective economic development in Michigan, ROC has articulated demands for fair treatment of workers in Michigan restaurants. It has been suggested that the Michigan Restaurant Association suggested the language above as a retaliatory move against ROC, its interns and their faculty advisors.

This language is so broad that it could potentially prevent public universities from forming partnerships or placing students with virtually any civic, religious, or other non-profit organization that engages in public outreach. It represents direct interference by the legislature in the university curriculum, and thereby curtails the academic freedom of the universities, their faculty members, and students. It is essential that the fundamental academic freedom and citizen engagement that are at the heart of our universities' mission not be held hostage to their budgetary needs.

We are collecting individual and organizational endorsements to include on the letter which has been cut and pasted as well as attached to this document, to Michigan legislators in the appropriations and conference committees. The legislature is moving quickly, and it is critical that you respond as soon as possible.

Please respond to the Intercollegiate Community Engagement Working Group at intercollegiatecommunity@gmail.com to indicate your willingness to sign on to this letter as an individual or as an organization, and please include your title and organizational position for identification purposes only. If you have any questions, please contact Ian Robinson (e.ian.robinson@gmail.com) or Michelle Kaminski (michellekaminsk@gmail.com) two members of the committee who are academic professionals.

If you prefer to send the letter directly (text attached as well as cut and pasted below), here are the email addresses of the legislators you should contact:

House Appropriations Emails

FredDurhal@house.mi.gov, shanellejackson@house.mi.gov, rashidatlaib@house.mi.gov, richardleblanc@house.mi.gov, anthonyforlini@house.mi.gov, ellenlipton@house.mi.gov, kengoike@house.mi.gov, chuckmoss@house.mi.gov, eileenkowall@house.mi.gov, jimananich@house.mi.gov, nancyjenkins@house.mi.gov, mattlori@house.mi.gov, seanmccann@house.mi.gov, earlpoleski@house.mi.gov, billrogers@house.mi.gov, joanbauer@house.mi.gov, petermacgregor@house.mi.gov, daveagama@house.mi.gov, AIPscholka@house.mi.gov, BobGenetski@house.mi.gov, JosephHaveman@house.mi.gov, KevinCotter@house.mi.gov, JonBumstead@house.mi.gov, PhilPotvin@house.mi.gov, GregMacMaster@house.mi.gov, stevenlindberg@house.mi.gov

Senate Appropriations Emails

ofcganderson@senate.mi.gov, sendboohar@senate.mi.gov, senbcaswell@senate.mi.gov, senpcolbeck@senate.mi.gov, senmgreen@senate.mi.gov, sengvincent@senate.mi.gov, senmhood@senate.mi.gov, senhhopgood@senate.mi.gov, senmjenson@senate.mi.gov, senbjohnson@senate.mi.gov, senrkahn@senate.mi.gov, senjmoolenaar@senate.mi.gov, senjpappageorge@senate.mi.gov, senjpoos@senate.mi.gov, sentshuitmaker@senate.mi.gov, senhwalker@senate.mi.gov

Thank you for supporting the academic freedom of Michigan's public universities to engage with their communities.

Sincerely,
The Intercollegiate Community Engagement Working Group

Dear Legislator,

The undersigned individuals and organizations write to draw your attention to proposed language in Michigan House Bill 5370 that would curtail academic freedom at any publicly funded university.

Language proposed by the House appropriations committee would prevent universities that receive public funds from collaborating with any non-profit organization that publicly criticizes any Michigan business. The language is a ham-fisted response to the concerns of one business in Southeastern Michigan whose practices were criticized by a non-profit organization while a student was serving as an intern at that non-profit.

Sec. 273a. It is the intent of the legislature that a public university that receives funds in section 236 shall not collaborate in any manner with a nonprofit worker center whose documented activities include coercion through protest, demonstration, or organization against a Michigan business.

The proposed language is so broad that it could potentially prevent public universities from forming partnerships or placing students with virtually any civic, religious, or other non-profit organization that engages in public outreach. It represents direct interference by the legislature in the university curriculum, and thereby curtails the academic freedom of the universities, their faculty members, and students.

Academic freedom is essential to the mission of the academy, and at times this can lead to ideas that can be uncomfortable for interest groups with differing viewpoints. The mission of the academy must remain independent of any particular interest group.

We are concerned that the current proposal would have a broad impact and may lead to further efforts to undermine academic freedom. We hope you will join us in seeking to preserve the independence of Michigan's public university system.

We ask that you strike Sec. 273a from House Bill 5370 when it comes to the Senate.

Sincerely,

Individual Organizational Title & Affiliations are provided for identification purposes only

Author



Rosemary Feurer

Rosemary Feurer is Professor of History at Northern Illinois University. She is the author of *Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950*, among other books and essays. She is working on *The Illinois Mine Wars, 1860-1940* and a new biography of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones.