

OFFICE OF THE CHANCELLOR

On Hate Speech and Campus Climate

November 20, 2023

Tensions are high on our USM campuses, and divisions are deepening. The war in the Middle East is both personal and political. Our students, faculty, and staff have friends and family in Gaza and Israel, and in countries where the violence is spilling over. Many of us are suffering, and I know my words have little chance of salving our pain.

Each of us is shaped by who we are. Our perspectives grow out of our lived history and that of our loved ones, those here today and our ancestors before us. And while I respect—*cherish*—the diversity of opinion that’s inevitable given the diversity of our populations, I’m committed, this *System* is committed, to ensuring that all of our people feel safe, no matter who they are.

That’s not the case right now. We’ve seen words and acts—antisemitic, Islamophobic—on our campuses. I’ve heard from mothers and fathers afraid for their children. It seems obvious to say that hate speech is wrong and reprehensible. Of course it is. I condemn it. There’s no excuse for allowing criticism of a government or group to metastasize into slurs against people who share the same nationality or ethnicity, who share a culture or faith. Hate is malignant and dangerous. Always.

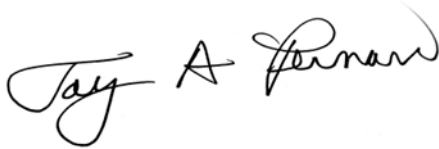
That doesn’t change the fact that most speech—even speech we find abhorrent—is constitutionally protected. But when that speech turns into threats or into behavior that’s illegal, it will be prosecuted. When it runs afoul of university rules, it will be punished.

Still, I believe that the most productive response to hate is sustained action that starves it of fuel and renders it weak. And so, whenever the time is right, I hope for dialogue, and I urge civility, even when—especially when—it feels so difficult. I hope that we can engage with one another across our differences and without incendiary speech; that we can share and listen. And I’m eager to help foster these conversations.

I’m not naïve enough to hope for agreement. But I am optimistic enough to hold out for the very things that higher education promises us: that we model empathy and practice compassion; that we draw on our shared humanity and our shared values to bridge what divides us.

I thank our universities and our devoted community of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends for offering support to those who are struggling—for offering opportunities to gather and comfort one another; to talk and to reflect; to remember the dead and pray for the living.

My hope is that, in time, what we have to show for our efforts is not merely words denouncing hate, but a shared commitment to using our work for light and for peace.



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