

Chancellor Wise:

I am writing to invite you to attend the academic seminar I am scheduled to deliver at College of Business at UIUC on October 29th. The room will be empty.

In your [letter of August 22nd](#), you defended the rescission of Steven Salaita's job offer on the grounds of civility:

"What we cannot and will not tolerate at the University of Illinois are personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them."

You wrote of your decision's "potential impact on academic freedom," and I thought you might like to witness the silencing effect it has had firsthand.

I am cancelling my seminar because I was planning on presenting preliminary work and I would not want to put anyone's job at risk. You see, while I personally have developed a thick skin, my ideas are new and fragile. They might be susceptible to abuse, leading the culprit scholar out on the street if untenured, or sent to the intellectual etiquette reeducation camp you must have established to enforce this policy among senior faculty. On the other hand, there isn't much point in presenting at a seminar if everything I am doing wrong must be respected.

You might find this concern ridiculous (a perilously uncivil term?), but where is the line? For example, Steven Pinker recently wrote [an exceptional essay](#) on the aims of liberal education in response to [an article](#) by William Deresiewicz the New Republic. Deresiewicz would obviously already have been fired from UIUC for referring to students as "entitled little shits," but what about Pinker? While he is careful to state that one aim of a liberal education is to ensure students recognize that "people who disagree with them are not stupid or evil," he later calls Deresiewicz' *argument* "not playing with a full deck." Has he crossed the line by disrespecting the argument (or would he already be out for the disrespectful heresy of having equated religious faith and alchemy elsewhere)?

In truth, this ex post justification for Professor Salaita's dismissal is just a fig leaf for the real issue at hand: the influence of donors on faculty speech. We know that Salaita was fired for upsetting donors because the University [initially supported](#) his right to free speech, and recognized his employment at the University: "Faculty have a wide range of scholarly and political views, and we recognize the freedom-of-speech rights of all of our employees." Subsequent [disclosures of your correspondence](#) with alumni, donors, and fellow administrators have made clear that you abandoned your "bedrock principle" of faculty independence under their pressure.

I will not be coming to UIUC because the university has signaled its unwillingness to protect its faculty from donors who attempt to silence those with whom they disagree. For economists, [this is no small issue](#): our work is on tradeoffs, which means there is often someone on the losing side of our analysis. How do you expect your faculty to continue producing world-class research if their jobs are at risk when they publish a result that is unpopular with a trustee? This is not a far-fetched hypothetical. The economists to whom I would have presented my work study climate change policies and the health effects of pollution--two topics in a single field which are sure to generate controversy. Your actions in the Salaita case signal that the UIUC is a place for robust debate until businesses, unions, politicians, or concerned citizens with enough clout cry foul. Once that happens, you've demonstrated a willingness to use any reason, no matter how

comically tortured the logic, to silence the faculty (censorship to protect free speech is an impressive contortion to pull off without recognizing the irony).

I will not be coming to UIUC until the university clarifies to its donors exactly what their contributions are buying--and that faculty speech is quite simply not on the menu. I'm afraid this is impossible until Steven Salaita is reinstated and the contract he was offered is honored. Anything short of that is just lip-service without any credible demonstration of the firewall that must exist for free academic inquiry to take place. That UIUC is a public university only reinforces the need for an explicit and widely-recognized policy of faculty independence. Any further discussion of whether or not his statements were "civil" is simply a distraction from this core issue.

I understand that you are in a difficult position. It's quite easy for people like me to take potshots from the moral high ground without having to ensure sufficient funds to keep the lights on. I urge you to consider the long-term damage wrought by gutting the guarantee of inquiry free from outside interference. It far exceeds any short-term gain in donations from donors who don't understand the difference between a university and a political action committee.

In the meantime, I hope that when other outside faculty are offered an opportunity to speak at your institution, they consider the dangerous precedent that has been set and the precarious position it creates for our friends and colleagues at UIUC.

Respectfully,

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