

Statement of Steven Salaita
September 9, 2014
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

My name is Steven Salaita. I am a professor with an accomplished scholarly record; I have been a fair and devoted teacher to hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students; I have been a valued and open-minded colleague to numerous faculty across disciplines and universities. My ideas and my identity are far more substantive and complex than the recent characterizations based on a selected handful of my Twitter posts.

I am here today at the University of Illinois to speak against my termination by the Administration from a tenured faculty position because of the University Administration's objections to my speech that was critical of recent Israeli human rights violations. The Administration's actions have caused me and my family great hardship. Even worse, the Administration's actions threaten principles of free speech, academic freedom, and critical thought that should be the foundation of any university.

Since 2006, I have been a faculty member of the English Department at Virginia Tech, where I earned lifetime tenure. On the basis of my scholarship and teaching record, and after substantial vetting, in 2013 I was enthusiastically recruited to join the faculty in the American Indian Studies program of UIUC. In October 2013, I accepted an offer from the interim Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences to join the University as a professor with lifetime tenure, which I accepted. The offer letter specifically referenced the University's adherence to the 1940 Principles of Academic Freedom codified by the AAUP.

In preparation for my new position, I resigned my tenured position at Virginia Tech; my wife resigned her professional position at the University as well. We got rid of our Virginia home and took on considerable expense in preparation for our move here. Two weeks before my start date, and without any warning, I received a summary letter from University Chancellor Phyllis Wise informing me that my position was terminated, but with no explanation or opportunity to challenge her unilateral decision. As a result, my family has no income, no health insurance, and no home of our own. Our young son has been left without a preschool. I have lost the great achievement of a scholarly career – lifetime tenure, with its promised protections of academic freedom.

As hard as this situation is on me personally, the danger of the University's decision has further reaching implications. Universities are meant to be cauldrons of critical thinking; they are meant to foster creative inquiry and, when at their best, challenge political, economic, or social orthodoxy. Tenure – a concept that is well over a hundred years old – is supposed to be an ironclad guarantee that University officials respect these ideals and do not succumb to financial pressure or political expediency by silencing controversial or unpopular views. I have devoted my entire life to challenging prevailing orthodoxies, critiquing architectures of power and violence in the US and abroad and surfacing narratives of people – including Palestinians and Native Americans – who are subject to occupation, marginalization, and violence.

The Chancellor and Board of Trustees are apparently displeased by messages I posted on my personal Twitter account that were critical of recent atrocities committed by the Israeli government, which the United Nations referred to as "criminal." My Twitter messages are no

doubt passionate and unfiltered; they reflect my deep dismay at the deaths of more than 2,000 innocent Palestinians, over 500 of them children.

In recent statements, Chancellor Wise and the Board of Trustees said that the University Administration found the tone of my tweets “uncivil” and raised questions about my ability to inhabit the University environment. This is a perilous standard that risks eviscerating the principle of academic freedom. My comments were not made in a classroom or on campus; they were made through my personal Twitter account. The University’s policing and judgment of those messages places any faculty member at risk of termination if University administrators deem the tone or content of his or her speech “uncivil” without regard to the forum or medium in which the speech is made. This is a highly subjective and sprawling standard that can be used to attack faculty who espouse unpopular or unconventional ideas.

Even more troubling are the documented revelations that the decision to terminate me is a result of pressure from wealthy donors – individuals who expressly dislike my political views. As the [Center for Constitutional Rights and other groups have been tracking](#), this is part of a nationwide, concerted effort by wealthy and well-organized groups to attack pro-Palestinian students and faculty and silence their speech. This risks creating a Palestinian exception to the First Amendment and to academic freedom. The ability of wealthy donors and the politically powerful to create exceptions to bedrock principles should be worrying to all scholars and teachers.

Finally, [my scholarship and strong student evaluations over the course of many years](#), along with the University’s enthusiastic recruitment of me as a faculty member, thoroughly belie Chancellor Phyllis Wise’s only recently-stated concern about my civility and respectfulness. As my colleagues and students will attest, I am a passionate advocate for equality, a fair and open-minded instructor, and highly collegial. No legitimate evidence exists for any claims or insinuations to the contrary, which have severely damaged my reputation and my prospects for future employment.

During this challenging time, I am deeply grateful to the [many hundreds of people and prominent organizations](#) who have raised their voices in defense of the principles of academic freedom, including the nearly [18,000 individuals who have signed a petition demanding corrective action](#) and the numerous [faculty](#) around the world who are boycotting the University until I am reinstated. The students and instructors gathered here have shown themselves to be exemplars of everything to which a university should aspire.

I am here to reaffirm my commitment to teaching and to a position with the American Indian Studies program at UIUC. I reiterate the demand that the University recognize the importance of respecting the faculty’s hiring decision and reinstate me. It is my sincere hope that I can – as a member of this academic institution – engage with the entire University community in a constructive conversation about the substance of my viewpoints on Palestinian human rights and about the values of academic freedom. This is, as we say in my profession, a “teaching moment.” We must all strive together to make the most of it.