



November 18, 2019

Martin T. Meehan, President
Office of the President
University of Massachusetts
1 Beacon St., Floor 31
Boston, Massachusetts 02108

Dear President Meehan,

We write as chair of the advisory board and executive director of the Academic Engagement Network and executive director of the AMCHA Initiative. Both of our organizations work to counter BDS-generated intolerance, respond to antisemitism on campuses across the country, and promote academic freedom.

We wish to express support for Chancellor Subbaswamy for his October 21st public statement condemning a recent pro-BDS event ("The Attack on BDS and American Democracy") as "one-dimensional" and "polarizing" and re-iterating his opposition to BDS. In his statement, Chancellor Subbaswamy correctly underscored the harmful nature of BDS in general and an academic boycott of Israel in particular, and he recognized BDS as "antithetical to academic freedom."

Chancellor Subbaswamy has been harshly attacked by faculty members and administrators on the Amherst and Boston UMass campuses. In the light of these developments, we urge you as the president to issue a system-wide statement clarifying that the University is opposed to academic boycotts of Israeli universities. As Chancellor Subbaswamy noted, an academic boycott of Israeli institutions is "antithetical to academic freedom" and would inflict substantive harm to the University's educational and research programs. In issuing such a statement UMass would join the chancellors of the ten University of California campuses, the University of Michigan, Pitzer College, the Association of American Universities, and other universities and academic organizations.

In requesting this action, we ask that you build upon the prior statements made by four UMass chancellors in response to the American Studies Association's adoption of an academic boycott of Israel in 2013. As chancellor of the Lowell campus at that time, you issued a statement showcasing your own campus' partnerships with the University of Haifa, Shenkar College of Engineering and Design, and Ben-Gurion University. You noted that these partnerships would surely be damaged by a "boycott that stifles communication and fosters resentment." Chancellor Subbaswamy remarked that "academic boycotts undermine the fundamental principles of free expression and inquiry that are central to our mission of teaching, research and service." Chancellor Motley of UMass Boston stated that "higher education is built upon a free and respectful exchange of ideas. Any action that seeks to inhibit this flow of knowledge, or to prevent academic collaborations, stands in direct contrast to our mission." And Chancellor Grossman of UMass Boston embraced a similar position,

describing a boycott of Israeli universities as an “assault on the academic freedom that we so cherish.”

We feel that a system-wide statement clarifying the UMass position is critical at this juncture. It also is crucial for faculty members themselves to understand that treating one’s own students or faculty colleagues as collateral damage to a political agenda is wrong and violates the principles of collegiality and academic integrity that are central to the university.

At least 56 faculty members at UMass Boston have endorsed an academic boycott of Israel. Some of the proponents serve in administrative positions, including the Dean of the Honors College, six department chairs, and four institute, center or program directors. Many of those faculty members and administrators have publicly pledged support for the US Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (USACBI). The official USACBI guidelines these faculty support urge members of the academic community “to boycott and/or work towards the cancellation or annulment of events, activities, agreements, or projects involving Israeli academic institutes or that otherwise promote the normalization of Israel in the global academy...or violate the BDS guidelines.” Were faculty to implement these guidelines, they would be engaging in activities that directly and substantively harm their own students and fellow faculty, by undermining their collaborative research and teaching projects with Israeli universities and scholars; by working toward the closure of their university’s study abroad programs in Israel; by refusing to write letters of recommendation for students wishing to study in Israel; and by attempting to cancel or shut down events featuring Israeli leaders or scholars organized by colleagues or students.

As Chancellor Subbaswamy correctly recognized, implementing an academic boycott of Israel subverts the scholarly and educational opportunities and curtails the academic freedom of any student or faculty member wanting to study or engage in research about or in Israel, or to work with Israeli scholars. This is particularly so on UMass campuses, where students and faculty alike benefit enormously from their institution’s collaborative relationships with Israeli academic institutions and scholars.

It is time for a clear statement of principles on academic boycotts at the system level. It is also time for robust discussion of the issues. We ask that you encourage the chancellors to ask their faculties to engage in frank discussions about the scope and limits of academic freedom in the context of academic boycotts.

Sincerely yours,



Mark G. Yudof
Chair, Advisory Board
Academic Engagement Network



Miriam F. Elman
Executive Director
Academic Engagement Network



Tammi Rossmann-Benjamin
Executive Director
AMCHA Initiative

cc: Chancellor Subbaswamy