



THE UNIVERSITY of
MISSISSIPPI

PROVOST AND EXECUTIVE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

January 7, 2021

Dr. Mary Lindemann
American Historical Association
400 A Street SE
Washington, DC 20003

Dear Dr. Lindemann,

We received your letter of concern questioning the recommendation made by Dr. Noell Wilson, chair of the University of Mississippi's Department of History, regarding the non-renewal of the contract of Dr. Garrett Felber, assistant professor of history.

While we typically do not comment on employment recommendations or decisions, I cannot accept this unjustified criticism of Dr. Wilson, one of our most principled and respected department chairs. In making this decision she was doing exactly what all universities expect their chairs to do – ensure that faculty members are willing and able to follow the rules and processes involved in securing external funding that commit the institution to a financial agreement. In fact, I respect that Dr. Wilson chose to make a very difficult recommendation when she lost confidence that an untenured faculty member would act in good faith and be responsive to her repeated efforts to help him succeed.

Four key issues need clarification. First, Dr. Felber was not fired or dismissed prior to his contract term. Instead, he was given a 12-months' notice of non-renewal. In making this recommendation, Dr. Wilson followed our policies governing untenured faculty (which are informed by and based on American Association of University Professors' standards and recommendations) and the process designed to treat him fairly as an untenured faculty member during his probationary period. After careful review of the data undergirding the recommendation and extended discussion with both the Chair and the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, I supported her recommendation and forwarded it to the Chancellor for final approval. Second, faculty clearly have a role in assessing the teaching, research, and service of their colleagues and that responsibility is well-articulated in our policies. However, this decision had nothing to do with teaching, research, or service. Therefore, faculty were not consulted regarding Dr. Wilson's recommendation of non-renewal. Third, University faculty committees are asked to review any and all recommendations to end the employment of a tenured faculty member and for untenured faculty members a recommendation to end employment prior to the end of their contract, which was not the case in this instance. This difference is a key distinction between the rights of review afforded to tenured versus untenured faculty members. Dr. Felber is not tenured, nor was he terminated or dismissed prior to the end of his employment agreement. Facts are important and this distinction is key because it dictated the applicable University policy that Dr. Wilson properly invoked and followed. Fourth, Dr. Wilson has been a strong supporter of Dr. Felber's research and scholarship since his arrival on campus and has provided more

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funding to him than any other faculty member in her department. I could also cite multiple examples of how offices across campus have supported his work as well as the work of other faculty on our campus who are engaged in research and scholarship addressing race and equity – work that is critically important to our state and nation.

Again, I must state unequivocally that this non-renewal decision was not motivated by or in any way related to the topics of Dr. Felber’s research, including the history of the carceral state and race, or his work with those who are incarcerated. We have other faculty members on our campus who have been engaged in this work since before he was hired and they will continue to do so moving forward. Frankly, his efforts and the efforts of others to characterize his non-renewal as retaliation for the content of his research is not only inaccurate, it marginalizes the many other valued researchers and scholars on our campus working in the same or similar areas of research and scholarship.

Further, the assumptions as to why this recommendation and decision were made, and the spurious links being made to his topics of research and to other aspects of his well-protected rights to free speech and academic freedom, are baseless and ungrounded in fact. Rather, they seem tied to the stereotypes of our institution’s past. Dr. Wilson has been painstakingly clear in her expectations, intentions, and guidance, in addition to Dr. Felber being well informed on the appropriate processes required for grantsmanship. In a letter that Dr. Felber circulated, she outlined several instances in which it was clear that he was unwilling to communicate with her except on terms that he unilaterally imposed, which is direct evidence of her efforts to effectively supervise him. Frankly, I am surprised at your willingness to call into question the credibility of another accomplished scholar and historian without considering the applicable University policy, without knowing the applicable facts, and failing to appreciate that there may be other relevant data that cannot be broadly shared due to the confidential nature of personnel issues.

I appreciate the importance you place on academic freedom and freedom of speech. We go to great lengths to defend and protect these core principles and will continue to do so. This said, and in accordance with these important values, we feel it is important to speak up when they are falsely implicated, as is the case here. We simply expect all faculty to respect the University’s processes, be coachable when they fall short, and have respect for the authority and responsibilities of their supervisor. These minimal professional standards are fundamental principles that are essential and expected in any effective employment arrangement, and I suspect they are important at the many other institutions employing the faculty you represent.

Sincerely,



Noel E. Wilkin, Ph.D.
Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs,
Professor, and Research Professor