August 7th, 2014

Dear Chancellor Wise:

We, the undersigned, write to express deep concern and bewilderment about the University of Illinois's decision to revoke its offer of a tenured position in the American Indian Studies Program to Professor Steven Salaita. UIUC's decision to withdraw an employment contract to Professor Salaita, after clearly extending a good-faith offer to him to join the faculty, is highly unusual and cause for great worry among those who value academic freedom, free speech, and fundamental due process. We are following up on Illinois’s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure’s expression of concern about this case. As the Illinois Committee A noted, “In the absence of due process, particularly if a contract was signed, any institutional action to reverse an offer of appointment would be a grave violation of academic due process.”

As scholars committed to advancing critical and open perspectives on the Israel-Palestine conflict, we are alarmed that parties external to the university have forced UIUC to take the drastic and unfortunate step of withdrawing Salaita’s appointment. It is a matter of public record that the Simon Wiesenthal Center, for example, had direct communication with President Easter about Salaita’s appointment. As reported in Inside Higher Education, UIUC’s administration withdrew Salaita’s job offer out of concern for the “incivility” and aggressive tone of several of Salaita’s Twitter messages about the Israeli military’s recent actions in Gaza. Drawing upon its formal report, “Academic Freedom and Electronic Communications, the National AAUP’s Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure declared today, “While Professor Salaita's scholarship does appear to deal with the topic of Palestine, his posts were arguably not intended as scholarly statements but as expressions of personal viewpoint. Whether one finds these views attractive or repulsive is irrelevant to the right of a faculty member to express them.”
The Israeli military’s targeting of Palestinian civilians in Gaza has been condemned by major human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, as well as leading international law experts including John Dugard and Richard Falk. The content of Salaita’s tweets were in fact consistent with the sentiments of leading experts on the Israel-Palestine conflict, including Jewish-Israeli scholars, to the degree that they expressed outrage and dismay at Israeli actions. It seems that popular knowledge about the Israel-Palestine conflict in the US public space has overwhelmed what is well known by academic experts. This cannot be allowed to happen in a serious university.

UIUC’s reevaluation of Professor Salaita’s suitability for a position at UIUC, after a faculty committee found him to be acceptable, is very arbitrary and highlights that political pressure tainted the appointment process. The AAUP 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure makes clear that a faculty member possesses a fundamental right to extramural utterance: “When they speak or write as citizens, they should be free from institutional censorship or discipline.” We should not forget why John Dewey, Arthur Lovejoy, and Edwin Seligman, the founders of the AAUP, sought to protect academic freedom—to ensure that academics could act as a check on the tyranny of public opinion. Furthermore, academics are free to address issues of public concern, as are all American citizens. Indeed, Dewey, Lovejoy, and Seligman recognized that university boards had become the major threats to academic freedom. The 1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure states:

Lay governing boards are competent to judge concerning charges of habitual neglect of assigned duties, on the part of individual teachers, and concerning charges of grave moral delinquency. But in matters of opinion, and of the utterance of opinion, such boards cannot intervene without destroying, to the extent of their intervention, the essential nature of a university—without converting it from a place dedicated to openness of mind, in which the conclusions expressed are the tested conclusions of trained scholars, into a place barred against the access of new light, and precommitted to the opinions or prejudices of men who have not been set apart or expressly trained for the scholar’s duties.
UIUC’s decision to revoke Professor Salaita’s tenured appointment is part of a series of outside interventions that have affected appointments and tenure decisions across the country after 9/11 and which have increased in intensity since. Furthermore, Illinois’s decision is taking us back to the post-9/11 hysteria, which victimized so many people, and sacrificed academic freedom. UIUC's administration must resist this latest infringement of academic freedom, as well as the obstruction of its own academic appointment process. If it does not do so, it is undermining its academic mission and destroying the conditions of possibility for unfettered expression and critical thought.

We call upon UIUC in the strongest terms to reverse its decision immediately and reinstate Professor Salaita, a decision which will reclaim UIUC's place among the nation’s pre-eminent public universities.

Sincerely,

1. Matthew Abraham, Associate Professor of English, Univ. of Arizona

2. A’sad Abukhail, Professor of Political Science, California State Univ.—Stanislaus

3. Sanjam Aluwalia, Associate Professor of History and Women and Gender Studies, Northern Arizona University

4. Talal Asad, Professor of Anthropology, City Univ. of New York

5. Timothy Brennan, Professor of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, Univ. of Minnesota—Twin Cities

6. Antoinette Burton, University of Illinois

7. Judith Butler, Maxine Elliot Professor, Univ. of California—Berkeley

8. Brian Connolly, Associate Professor of History, Univ. of South Florida

9. Hamid Dabashi, Hagop Kervorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Columbia University
10. Natalie Zemon Davis, Professor of History, University of Toronto

11. Samera Esmeir, Associate Professor of Rhetoric, Univ. of California—Berkeley

12. Keya Ganguly, Professor of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, University of Minnesota—Twin Cities

13. Neville Hoad, Associate Professor of English, University of Texas—Austin

14. Bruce Levine, James G. Randall Distinguished Professor of History, University of Illinois—Urbana Champaign

15. Joseph Massad, Professor of Modern Arab Politics and Intellectual History, Columbia University

16. Aamir Mufti, Professor of Comparative Literature, University of California—Los Angeles

17. Jose Quiroga, Professor of Spanish, Emory University

18. Dana Sadji, Associate Professor of History, Boston College

19. Joan Scott, Fellow, Harold F. Linder Professor in the School of Social Sciences, Institute for Advanced Study

20. Zohreh T. Sullivan, Professor Emerita of English and African Studies, Univ. of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign

Cc: President Robert Easter
    Professor Robert Warrior

1 See: http://academeblog.org/2014/08/06/illinois-aaup-committee-a-statement-on-steven-salaita-and-uiuc/
