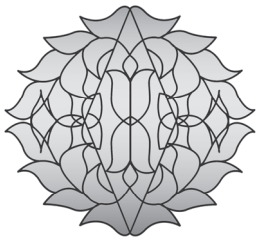


**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

1219 N Santa Rita Ave
The University of Arizona
Tucson AZ 85721 USA

520 621-5850
520 626-9095 fax
mesana@u.arizona.edu
www.mesana.org



MESA '09

8 May 2009

Joel Michaelsen, Chair
Academic Senate
Academic Senate Office, 1233 Girvetz Hall
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, California 93106

via fax # 805-893-8732

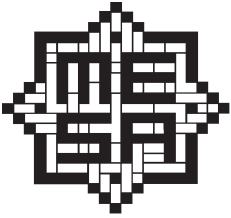
Dear Professor Michaelsen,

On behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America, I am writing to express our grave concerns about the investigation that UCSB's Academic Senate is conducting into allegations of misconduct on the part of Professor William Robinson. Specifically, we are troubled by the university's willingness to open an investigation into Professor Robinson's conduct based on criticism of his views by students, by an apparent lack of due process and adherence to university procedures, and by the possibility that outside interference influenced the decision to move forward with an official investigation despite strong evidence suggesting that the claims that Robinson had committed violations of the Faculty Code of Conduct were without merit.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has more than 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

It is our understanding that this investigation stems from an email message that Professor Robinson sent to students in his course "Sociology of Globalization" on January 19, 2009. In that email message Professor Robinson forwarded an article that juxtaposed images from the Holocaust with images from Gaza during the Israeli assault of December 2008-January 2009, drew a parallel between the plight of Gaza and the Warsaw Ghetto under Nazi rule, and strongly denounced Israeli policies and actions toward the Palestinians. His message accompanying the article accused the Israeli government of engaging in genocide against the Palestinians, though he noted that (as he saw it) Israel's intent was "not so much to physically eliminate each and every Palestinian than to eliminate the Palestinians as a people in any meaningful sense of the notion of people-hood."

On February 9, 2009, the regional office of the ADL sent a letter of complaint to Professor Robinson, with copies to university officials. Ten days later two of Professor Robinson's students complained that they believed the content of his email message to be anti-Semitic, and they also alleged that that message constituted an "abuse of an instructor position" and violated "the integrity of the faculty-student relationship." We also understand that on March 9, 2009, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, accompanied by a local ADL representative, met with a group of UCSB administrators and faculty members, and that at that meeting Mr. Foxman pressed university officials to investigate Professor Robinson and sanction him for the email message he had circulated. It is our understanding that Executive Dean David Marshall relayed to Foxman and others in attendance that a



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

Joel Michaelson
8 May 2009
Re: Investigation of William Robinson's Conduct
Page 2

charges process against Professor Robinson was underway.

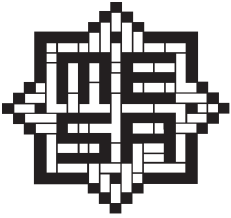
If true, this would constitute a violation of the confidentiality of such procedures. Moreover, it is our understanding that the Ad Hoc Committee was tasked with opening a formal investigation two weeks after Mr. Foxman's meeting with university personnel, on March 25, and that there is ongoing pressure from the ADL on the university to continue this investigation.

Whether or not one agrees with the substance of Professor Robinson's views on Israel or with the way he chose to express them, we believe that there are grounds for grave concern about the allegation that his email message is anti-Semitic as well as about the university's decision to bring him up on charges for the content of that message and its circulation to students. As a faculty member at UCSB, which claims to be firmly committed to the defense of academic freedom, Professor Robinson is entitled to express his views freely, even on controversial issues and even when some students may be upset or offended by what he has to say. The expression of those views in the context of a course that deals with global issues seems entirely appropriate as well. In this regard, there is no evidence that Professor Robinson "intimidated" the students through the email's dissemination or prevented them from expressing views challenging its content or arguments.

According to the standards established by the American Association of University Professors, instructors have the right to "stimulate discussion and encourage critical thought by drawing analogies or parallels the vigor and vibrancy of classroom," in the absence of which "discussion will be stultified." It further declares that "ideas that are germane to a subject under discussion in a classroom cannot be censored because a student with particular religious or political beliefs might be offended." The issues raised by Robinson are clearly germane both to the study of globalization in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to the specific themes addressed by the course as set forth in its description in the UCSB catalog.

Beyond our concerns about the Charges Officer's apparent reliance on an overly broad definition of anti-Semitism to bring charges against Professor Robinson, we are also very concerned that Professor Robinson's chair and dean were apparently not alerted to the students' complaints, the appropriate initial procedural recourse in such a situation. More generally, we are concerned that university officials may have been unduly influenced by the pressure brought to bear on them by Mr. Foxman and his organization, which is known for aggressively attacking the kind of speech at the heart of this case. Discussing the case with ADL representatives in any manner constituted a violation of Robinson's right to confidentiality, and opened the door to the appearance of outside influence in the adjudicatory process. The events that transpired at this March 9 meeting should be the subject of investigation in this regard.

Universities are often subjected to pressure by outside groups with their own political agendas, but it is the responsibility of university officials to defend their faculty against such pressure and uphold the principles of academic freedom. There are indications that this did not happen in Professor Robinson's case. Moreover, we cannot ignore the larger context which surrounds this case: the fact that in recent years faculty at many colleges and universities



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc.

Joel Michaelson
8 May 2009
Re: Investigation of William Robinson's Conduct
Page 3

across the United States have been targeted by advocacy organizations in an apparent attempt to stifle criticism of Israeli policies, often by alleging that such criticism is anti-Semitic.

We call on the UCSB Academic Senate to reconsider the charges against Professor Robinson to ensure that they do not constitute a violation of his academic freedom. We also call on the university to do whatever is necessary to ensure that its own procedures for investigating a faculty member accused of violating its Faculty Code of Conduct were strictly and fully adhered to in this case. Finally, we call on UCSB to reiterate its commitment to academic freedom for all faculty, including those who address controversial and sensitive issues, and to assure its faculty that it will not succumb to pressure from external organizations pursuing political agendas intended to stifle free speech and undermine the principles of academic freedom.

Respectfully,

Virginia H. Aksan
MESA President
Professor of History, McMaster University

cc:

Henry Yang, Chancellor
Gene Lucas, Executive Vice Chancellor
David Marshall, Executive Dean
Melvin Oliver, Dean of Social Sciences