

Elizabeth R. Cole, Interim Dean
Professor of Women's Studies, Psychology and Afroamerican & African Studies

October 3, 2018

Professor John Cheney-Lippold

Dear Professor Cheney-Lippold,

This letter is in follow up to our meeting on September 20, 2018.

The events leading up to our meeting began on August 21, 2018, when one of your students

You later publicly acknowledged that you were incorrect regarding University departments that supported the boycott and that it was instead, "a personal stance"; that your decision to withdraw the offer of a recommendation letter "did not interfere improperly with [your] student's plans" and that the student's request "was not the first time [you had] been asked by a student to write a letter of recommendation for study in Israel. Two other students asked before [this student], and [you] wrote letters for them." You stated: "I wrote letters for them because I did not have tenure."

To be clear, there are no University departments participating in the boycott and, in fact, the University formally and publicly opposes a boycott of Israeli academic institutions.

On September 18, 2018, you used class time for both courses you are teaching to discuss your views on the BDS movement and your decision to withdraw your offer to write a recommendation letter.

Based on these facts and my discussion of this matter with the LSA Executive Committee, I have reached a number of conclusions.

First and foremost, your conduct has fallen far short of the University's and College's expectations for how LSA faculty interact with and treat students.

Supporting the academic aspirations of your students is fundamental to your responsibilities as a faculty member. You have an obligation to support your students' academic growth. Rather than fulfill this obligation, you used the student's request as a platform to express your own personal views.

There is an expectation that our faculty will provide letters of recommendation to students who need them for many reasons, including admission to programs of study and job applications. Just as you benefited from letters written on your behalf by faculty and external reviewers who respected and supported your aspirations, it is an expectation that you will do the same for your students. A student's academic merit should be the primary guide for determining whether to write a letter. Faculty are not required to write letters for every student who requests them, and have discretion to decline for legitimate reasons such as lack of time, information about the student, and academic assessment; however, that discretion is not unfettered. It does not extend to withholding a letter because of your personal views regarding the student's place of study and then using the student's request as a political platform to gain an audience for your own opinions, both in the media and in the classroom.

These longstanding norms regarding student letters of recommendation were recently publicly affirmed by the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA) in a September 24, 2018 Statement Regarding Letters of Reference, which reads:

The Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs affirms its commitment to the American Association of University Professors' Statement of Professional Ethics and wishes to draw the University community's attention to section 2, relating to a professor's educational responsibilities:

As teachers, professors encourage the free pursuit of learning in their students. They hold before them the best scholarly and ethical standards of their discipline. Professors demonstrate respect for students as individuals and adhere to their proper roles as intellectual guides and counselors. Professors make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct and to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student's true merit. They respect the confidential nature of the relationship between

professor and student. They avoid any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment of students. They acknowledge significant academic or scholarly assistance from them. They protect their academic freedom.

Within the guidelines set forth by the American Association of University Professors, and “demonstrate[ing] respect for students,” faculty should let a student’s merit be the primary guide for determining how and whether to provide such a letter.

Your actions in this matter failed to demonstrate the respect for your student to which was entitled and deserved. You acted on the basis of your personal beliefs rather than in the best interest of the student.

Second, your statements to the media indicate a disregard for the student’s well-being. You stated to the *Washington Post* that your decision to withdraw the offer of a recommendation letter “did not interfere improperly with [your] student’s plans.” However, your conduct could easily have denied the student an academic opportunity. Your statement to the *Detroit News* that “[t]he student had gone to the president, sent an email to him, and was going to have a meeting with [a] dean,” and your statement to *Inside Higher Ed* that you had “not heard from the student since [you] sent the email Sept. 5,” violated privacy and drew an unwanted national spotlight on

I have also that you used class time in your course Amcult 358 on Tuesday, September 18, 2018 to discuss your political opinions. In your meeting with me on September 20, 2018, you contended that you spent only 15 minutes of class time on these issues. But revealed that you dedicated all or nearly all of class time in Amcult 358 and Amcult 103 to discuss your reasons for not writing the recommendation, as well as your opinions on the boycott movement. Beyond issues of candor, you did not honor your responsibility to teach your students the material on your syllabus related to your field of expertise. According to the AAUP’s report on academic freedom and responsibility (<https://www.aaup.org/report/freedom-and-responsibility>), the justification for academic freedom lies in the faculty member’s mastery of their scholarly area, so “it is improper for an instructor persistently to intrude material that has no relation to the subject.” Although this material was discussed in only one session, an entire class period represents a significant portion of your total contact hours with students over the semester.

This use of class time to discuss your personal opinions was a misuse of your role as a faculty member. The result was that at least students

If you felt students in your classes needed an opportunity to discuss the controversy in which you were involved, it would have been more appropriate to either invite a third party to lead that conversation, or to hold a dedicated office hour for students with questions about the matter.

Your actions throughout this entire series of events has harmed your students and has caused significant disruption to the Department of American Culture, the College, and the University as a whole.

For the foregoing reasons and for the reasons we discussed in our September 20, 2018 meeting, I am taking the following actions:

- **This letter is a strong warning that your behavior in this circumstance was inappropriate and will not be tolerated. In the future, a student's merit should be your primary guide for determining how and whether to provide a letter of recommendation. You are not to use student requests for recommendations as a platform to discuss your personal political beliefs;**
- **You will not be eligible for a merit increase for the 2018-2019 academic year; and**
- **Your sabbatical eligibility and credits will be frozen for two years until Fall semester 2020. Accordingly, your Winter 2019 sabbatical will be delayed for two years until Fall 2020. You will not accrue sabbatical credits during AYs 2018-2019 and 2019-2020.**

Please be advised that further conduct of this nature is subject to additional discipline, up to and including initiation of dismissal proceedings under Regents Bylaw 5.09.

Nothing in this letter is intended to discourage you from speaking on or advocating for matters that are of concern to you, which you are free to do. But interfering with a student's academic aspirations, as you have done here, is not acceptable and will not be tolerated.

Sincerely,



**Elizabeth R. Cole
Interim Dean**

Professor of Women's Studies, Psychology, and Afroamerican & African Studies