

Statement from President Eric Kaler

March 7, 2016

At the University of Minnesota, we are proud to promote a climate of open, thoughtful and civil debate among our students, who bring great passion and energy to their positions and causes. This week, student leaders in the Minnesota Student Association at the University will be asked to consider two resolutions, one brought forth by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and the other by Students Supporting Israel (SSI).

I respect this student exercise of the right of political participation, including the right to offer these resolutions and to debate them freely. I am also aware of efforts by students on varying sides of the issue to discuss these resolutions and related matters with one another over the past many days. While I understand that sharp differences remain, I hope these conversations will continue.

As this student debate has developed, I have received many messages of concern from students, faculty, staff, elected officials, religious leaders and other members of the broader community about these resolutions. There are times when my conscience and my position at the University dictate that I comment and express views that I know may be unpopular with some members of our campus community. The recent debate surrounding these resolutions is one of those times, and I want to respectfully let our community know of my thinking, and of my concerns about both resolutions.

The University does not endorse measures advocated in the SJP resolution, which has been offered in support of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement. The BDS Movement, while not directly mentioned in the resolution, has called for a comprehensive academic, cultural, economic and consumer boycott of Israel. In general, our university should be wary about such boycotts, given our core values of academic freedom and our commitment to the free exchange of ideas, uncertainty about the impact of such efforts, and concerns that we may be unfairly singling out one government and the citizens of the country in question. In this case, my concerns are heightened by the fact that the Global BDS movement does not seem to distinguish between opposition to the policies of the government of Israel and opposition to the existence of Israel.

(more)

I have also been asked about the SSI resolution condemning anti-semitism. Our University strongly and unequivocally condemns prejudice and hostility toward Jews, as we condemn bias against any groups. And I share the concerns of many that we must be especially vigilant in light of resurgent anti-semitism in Europe and anti-semitism in other parts of the world. Yet I am also concerned that the second resolution may limit the prospects for constructive campus dialogue, in light of its possible implication that supporters of the divestment resolution are also supporters of anti-semitism. I do welcome vigorous and civil debate on these issues, but I am concerned that this second resolution may not advance that objective.

I hope our students – who represent such diverse backgrounds and perspectives – will come together in common efforts to advance peace and reconciliation in the Middle East region and the world. Of course, our students can do so best when they feel they are in a supportive environment that promotes respectful discussion and dialogue. I have written about the need to provide such a welcoming environment for our Muslim students, and I write now to encourage efforts to sustain the same environment for our Jewish students and, indeed, students of all faiths and backgrounds. We at the University of Minnesota stand ready to support and assist in this important undertaking.

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