

# MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

January 11, 2021

Dear Faculty and Academic Staff:

I want to welcome you back on this first day of spring semester 2021. This January, we find ourselves amid a unique time with a number of pressing concerns, including the vital importance of education, of critical inquiry, and of community responsibility. In the wake of the incivility and violence we witnessed last Wednesday at the U.S. Capitol building, many are experiencing a range of complex emotions – from sadness and exasperation, to fatigue and outrage. While these concerns extend beyond our campus, their impact is felt here at MSU, as our place of work, and as an institution of higher education. These are challenging times and we must continue to work on the essential nature of truth and knowing, of discussion and dissent, and of respect and the value of all people.

Reflecting back on last semester, and as we rejoin our shared work today, I want to thank you for your ongoing dedication to student success and academic excellence at MSU, especially this academic year. Despite all that is taking place across the nation, including the pandemic and its accompanying challenges, our community of scholars has developed innovative ways to maintain the university's fundamental academic commitments while simultaneously maintaining the health and safety of our faculty, staff, and students. For that I extend my greatest gratitude and respect to each of you.



## OFFICE OF THE PROVOST

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To enable the academic success and advancement of faculty and academic staff, Michigan State University provides many professional development opportunities and support programs, at the department, college, and university level. Colleagues and disciplinary networks provide additional support and guidance. As a community of scholars, we are committed to lifelong learning and expanding our knowledge and understanding of the world around us. Thank you for completing DEI Foundations, our new mandatory diversity, equity, and inclusion educational development program for students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Students will be completing the program by the end of March. Engaging in this shared educational experience represents a positive step in the right direction for our campus community.

While we have myriad mechanisms of support in place for our faculty and academic staff, we also have a number of policies in place to guide and define the responsibilities associated with our work as MSU employees. As

we head into this spring semester, I ask that you **please review a number of particularly important employment-related University policies (accompanying this letter) that merit the close attention of administrators, faculty, and academic staff.** For those who have been at MSU for a number of years, this will serve to refresh your memory and understanding. For those new to the university, it will help acquaint you with these important policies that inform the breadth and scope of your daily work. A brief summary of each policy is provided in the attached document, along with websites and contact information, should you have any questions. You will note some of these policies have recently been revised, and some address multiple layers of responsibility that extend to requirements of units themselves, not just individuals. Please also keep an eye out for an email from Human Resources and Academic Human Resources (AHR) about reporting suspected criminal activity and conduct.

Much like our curriculum and academic programs, which are routinely reviewed and revised to stay current, relevant, and of the highest quality, our policies related to faculty and academic staff not only deserve, but demand, equal attention. Since my arrival in August, I have emphasized that foremost on my agenda is an evaluation of the status quo of structures and processes within the Office of the Provost, from an equity lens with keen focus on potentially racist and sexist policies, practices, and behaviors. I have directed everyone within academic leadership to do the work needed to form a more inclusive and fair university that supports all learners, all educators, all leaders – each of us, fundamentally, as human beings. The Office of the Provost has already begun efforts across campus to identify and eradicate inequitable policies, practices, and behaviors that create barriers to success for *all* members of our MSU community – faculty, students, and staff. This work extends to evaluation of our policies for faculty and academic staff.

Toward that end, I have asked leadership in AHR, as the faculty and academic staff affairs unit within the Office of the Provost, to assemble a taskforce to review all policies related to faculty and academic staff. Language matters, so as a fundamental starting point, this taskforce will work to eliminate the use of binary pronouns in all policies. As the taskforce undertakes its extensive work, it will seek input from faculty and academic staff via established academic governance committees and faculty senators. More information will be shared as next steps are identified.

A proposed “Code of Professional Standards and Behaviors for Faculty and Academic Staff,” developed by the University Committee on Faculty Affairs (UCFA), was discussed last fall by the Faculty Senate. Suggestions for additional review and input on changes to the existing document were sent by the Faculty Senate to the UCFA. I am heartened that our faculty are

continuing to discuss this matter – which is precisely what our faculty governance covenants require us to do. However, we must now move expeditiously from deliberation to adoption and implementation.

Since I have become Provost, the Office of the Provost continues to make conscious and deliberate efforts to acknowledge and support the experience and success of individuals at MSU who for too long were underserved in an environment that failed to meet the highest ethical and community standards. We have taken a critical look at systemic structures, how each and every decision is made, where institutional failures have occurred, and to examine the factors that have adversely impacted our culture for many years. Important policy changes since 2018 include a [Self-Disclosure Requirement of Unprofessional/Criminal Conduct](#), a [Travel Lodging policy](#), a [Consensual Amorous or Sexual Relationships with Students policy](#), and revision of the [Emeritus policy](#). Two additional policy changes – the Professional Standards for Faculty and Academic Staff discussed above, as well as changes to the Discipline and Dismissal of Tenured Faculty for Cause policy – are pending at this time. Other initiatives include training for MSU leaders on creating and sustaining a respectful work environment, the creation of a leadership development framework, and the implementation of professional standards training. In addition, a policy to prevent the “Pass the Harasser” phenomenon has been recommended for review/revision. Areas requiring further attention include healthy mentoring and advising relationships, building competencies for leaders in addressing misconduct and other skills, and assessing leadership competencies when recruiting and hiring. This work continues.

In addition, we are looking closely at instances in which there was “no finding” of a policy violation by the Office of Institutional Equity (OIE). There are cases where the “no finding” is accurate and fair. There are, however, cases where, despite a “no finding” of OIE violations, the behavior was concerning, inappropriate, and uncollegial. Instances of concerning, inappropriate, and uncollegial behavior must be addressed to promote a healthy and safe work environment for all at MSU. We are putting systems and procedures into place to address these cases on a long-term and consistent basis.

For instances in which there is a finding, disciplinary actions are determined based on specifics of the case obtained following a thorough investigation, an examination of any type of precedent, and the consideration of aggravating and mitigating factors. AHR works with the unit administrator (usually a chairperson or school director) and dean, along with the Office of the General Counsel, in working through this process and determining appropriate penalties. For those teaching faculty and academic staff who are

not in the tenure system or some other continuing employment system and are represented by the Union of Non-tenure Track Faculty for the teaching portion of their appointment, AHR works with the Office of Employee Relations and the unit in determining appropriate penalties.

As is typical within higher education and consistent with the standards of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), MSU's procedures include considerable due process and opportunity for peer review before discipline is imposed. Additionally, there are appeals processes through the Faculty Grievance Procedure for discipline. And for tenure system faculty, following a dean's recommendation of dismissal, the process includes: (1) a confidential review and report to the Provost from one of the faculty members of the Dismissal for Cause Review Panel, (2) the faculty member being given the opportunity to meet with the Provost, (3) a hearing before a three-person faculty panel drawn from the University Committee for Faculty Tenure, and (4) if that panel recommends dismissal and the President supports it, the Board of Trustees decides if tenure is to be revoked and the faculty member dismissed.

While the Office of the Provost works on the procedures associated with egregious and unbecoming behavior, I urge each of you to enter into a period of self-reflection. What are the ways in which I can make myself, my unit or department, my college, and my institution better? Policies are the necessary product of aligning our aspirations of ourselves with our failings as individuals. The duty of every member of the MSU community, at this time, is to see themselves as the foundation of culture and as the fundamental agents of the change we seek. Colleagues, let us each recommit to our better selves.

As the late U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg pointed out in 2017 in *Sessions v. Morales-Santana*, "new insights and societal understandings can reveal unjustified inequality ... that once passed unnoticed and unchallenged." By dedicating ongoing attention to keeping MSU's policies current and relevant to the lived experiences of all members of our community we are saying: *we have noticed that there are behaviors and instances of incivility and inequality that take place outside of the current scope of standard definitions that must be addressed. And we are challenging those prior understandings.*

This important work is about changing both the lens and the narrative, and about calling out the standard lexicon and expanding it to more accurately represent the lived experiences of a broader and more diverse range of individuals across our campus community. It is good scholarship – questioning our inherited body of knowledge, interrogating it deeply, and

then sending it back to our community in a way that not only points out its shortcomings and inadequacies, but brings greater enlightenment and ensures justice for all faculty, staff, and students across campus. This work is especially valuable to and for those who have been historically underrepresented, marginalized, silenced, and erased. And it is equally valuable and important to and for those who have witnessed these shortcomings to acknowledge our institutional failures and commit to being part of the change. This is a shared responsibility for all of us.

As your new Provost, I join President Stanley and others across all areas of the University in pledging a strong commitment to change at Michigan State University and acknowledge that this is hard work which requires partnership and communal effort. No one person or single office can do this alone; it requires perseverance, vigilance, and community-wide dedication. I am proud of the work we are doing; it is necessary and there is still much more to be done. You have my unwavering commitment as your Provost and as a member of this faculty to enact change, to provide consistency, and to remain true to the guiding values of the institution. Those who have been harmed and experience trauma remind us of our duty and responsibility to ensure a more diverse and equitable, safer, and more respectful university, campus community, and place of work for us all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Teresa K Woodruff". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

**Teresa K. Woodruff, Ph.D.** (she/her/hers)  
Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs  
MSU Foundation Professor