

November 25, 2020

To the Affected Students and UMass Community:

I would like to express my sincere and genuine apology for the events having transpired this Fall in addressing the impacts of the words of my employee, Chair Prabhu Rajkumar. What has come of this is a disappointing, upsetting, and unwelcoming student environment, worsened by the harms created by my actions and inactions. On the afternoon of October 30, 2020, I was made aware, by a group of students, of the concerns, feelings, and demand for action regarding statements made on the personal social media of Chair Rajkumar over the summer. I investigated the concern and worked on a response that would be best suited to the needs of the affected students involved, by consulting the necessary parties of SGA Leadership, including the President, Attorney General, Chairs, Advisors, and legal counsel to gain as much information and insight as possible. My response to these students, sent three business days later on November 4, 2020, and statement made at that night's Senate meeting included a commitment to listening, and call to engage in dialogue, uphold anti-racist practices, and address the impact of the tweets through a restorative justice approach. I also made it clear that a part of this situation rests at the intersection of legality and the constitutional right of free speech, and therefore I was constrained in my role as Speaker to meet a demand of immediate removal of Chair Rajkumar. I was, and continue to be committed to ongoing anti-racism training for the entire SGA. Yet, I understand that to be truly accountable, I must deliver concrete steps and actions for change, to which I unfortunately missed the mark and need to apologize for.

My initial approach to this important issue involved opening a dialogue with these students to better understand the needs and desired outcomes of the students the SGA represents. However, with this, the goal of listening and centering their voices was not met, and caused students of color to relive their trauma and to be put into an undesirable situation. I am taking full responsibility for not being assertive in my leadership role to uplift and protect BIPOC students, and prioritize their voices when they have spoken out on their pain. In an advisor's meeting held on November 17, 2020, I caused harm through my inaction to assertively call out the unprofessional behavior of Chair Kyle Kendall. In this meeting, we lost sight of a purpose to address the harms and amplify the need to fix the racism that exists structurally in the SGA. This resolution must be centered on the voices of BIPOC students but the work cannot fall solely on them. During the November 18, 2020 Senate meeting, I failed to address this situation publicly or produce a necessary timeline for ensuring accountability of the SGA. I have spoken and expressed my disappointment to both Chair Rajkumar and Chair Kendall and expect them both

to take responsibility for harms of their actions and words through their own genuine apology and further commitment to their Committee racial justice action plan.

Moving forward, I am fully committed to growth and healing through short term, and long term, action steps. Currently, alongside continuing anti-racism trainings in the SGA, the Executive and Legislative branches are committing to concrete action plans for racial justice, and are making internal and structural changes that are preventative and clear. These plans constructed by individual leaders in both branches must be made publicly available and have defined goals and timelines that we can be held accountable to. This is a priority for myself and the SGA. By November 28, 2020, the Office of the Speaker, each Committee Chair, Cabinet member, and the President/VP, will have drafted their plans to be then put to a review by our SGA leadership for comments, feedback, and improvement by December 12, 2020. These plans, consisting of individual and collective actions will be made available to all students before the beginning of next semester. As the Speaker, I want to ensure that each SGA member is educated on being actively anti-racist, incorporates this into all of their work, and that “uncomfortable” conversations are not avoided. Additionally, the SGA leaders, including myself, will be examining our governing documents, the SGA Constitution and Bylaws, to implement explicit responsibility to anti-racism, ethics, and professionalism. This process is intended to be transparent and address the issue at hand head-on, as well as confront the systemic racism this organization harbors that has been cast aside for far too long.

As students and student leaders, we all need to learn and grow. This comes with recognizing faults and changing approaches to reach productive and healthy outcomes. I own up to not approaching this in a way that fully recognized and centered the hurt and pain felt by BIPOC students. I am disappointed that a situation such as this had occurred and had not been dealt with in a way that promotes healing and positive action, in part by my own leadership falling short. I was elected to this position to represent all students and advocate on their behalf for an equitable, safe, and welcoming student experience, and I want nothing more than to do that through relaying my genuine apology for not meeting that expectation. Having concrete plans of action will help ensure something like this never happens again and address the long-standing issue of racism that plagues our organization, institution, and nation. I hope to rebuild trust within the students, communities, and SGA itself by following my words with action.

As white woman, I will never be able to understand this pain or be able to completely empathize with the feelings that BIPOC students have and must face every day. I am aware of my white privilege, especially in my position, and with this privilege I am afforded, I must do better to amplify the voices of BIPOC students and confront the harms that have been created by the SGA, the Legislative Branch, and now myself. I am truly sorry for how this has progressed. I whole-heartedly agree that more action needs to be done to ensure that situations like these never happen again, starting with my individual action. The SGA is here to support, respect, and value

all students, and together, we will ensure our commitment to correcting our faults in the short term and long term, making the SGA a true representation of the diverse constituency we are elected to serve. I am here, I am listening, and I am sorry. I will always be available to the UMass community and do everything in my power to be the best advocate for you. Please stay safe and healthy and best of luck on the upcoming week of final exams. Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Julia Fox*

Julia Fox  
SGA Speaker