

January 25, 2021

Douglas A. Girod, Chancellor
University of Kansas
Office of the Chancellor
Strong Hall
1450 Jayhawk Blvd., Room 230
Lawrence, KS 66045

Dear Chancellor Girod,

The American Historical Association regards with dismay the recent decision by the Kansas Board of Regents to temporarily allow public institutions of higher education to terminate or suspend employees, including tenured faculty, without declaring a financial emergency. We urge you to join with other campus leaders in the state university system to reject this policy, which is contrary to principles of shared governance and reasonable ethical standards of academic employment.

The American Historical Association supports the essential principles of academic freedom and tenure first articulated by the American Association of University Professors in 1940 and updated in 1970. In our reaffirmation of these principles in 2016, the AHA emphasized that “freedom of expression is essential to historical inquiry.” In this context, tenure provides necessary protection for teaching, research, and service to the benefit of the university and its students. If tenure is abolished or even suspended temporarily, history, like other disciplines at KU, will find it extremely difficult to hire and retain the highly qualified faculty currently at work in your history department.

The AHA recognizes the difficult financial circumstances that institutions of higher education face in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, but we are concerned that in the current climate of divisive and rancorous public discourse, tenured faculty positions may be placed at risk with chilling effect, all cloaked in financial language. In fact, the need for adequate public investment in higher education has never been greater. Recent events show clearly the need to educate our students and the general public about the history of the United States—its institutions, modes of governance, and vibrant diversity of peoples and cultures. We recognize that the study of history itself has become politicized to an unprecedented degree, and therefore it is essential that the university protect scholars so that they may teach, do their research, and publish without fear of reprisal or loss of livelihood.

As historians, we are especially aware of what can happen when principles of academic freedom in higher education lose the essential protection of tenure. We strongly urge you to reject this extraordinary departure that would enable the university to enact drastic and arbitrary personnel actions while bypassing the process of formally declaring financial emergency.

Sincerely,



Jacqueline Jones
AHA President