



Professor Noell Howell Wilson
Chair, Department of History
Provost Noel Wilkin
Chancellor Glenn Boyce
The University of Mississippi
University, MS 38677

December 28, 2020

Dear Professor Wilson, Provost Wilkin, and Chancellor Boyce,

On behalf of the Organization of American Historians, we write to protest the recent decision at the University of Mississippi to not renew Garrett Felber's contract as a tenure-track professor in the Arch Dalrymple III Department of History. The effective termination of Professor Felber's employment is an attack on the [standards of academic freedom espoused by the OAH](#). We are deeply concerned about the chilling effect of this decision—which will likely extend far beyond this specific instance—on academic freedom. We also strongly assert that the principles of academic freedom in research and publication, teaching and learning, and in public expression apply equally to tenured, tenure track, and contingent faculty, as well as to graduate student instructors and research assistants.

As the largest professional organization in the country representing historians of U.S. history, the OAH is dedicated to promoting excellence in the scholarship, teaching, and presentation of American history. As teachers and scholars, we seek to inform public discussion of and engagement with historical questions that are critical to understanding our nation's past and present. Academic freedom—the principle of freedom of expression for scholars engaged in discipline-related teaching, learning, research, publication, and service—is critical to the pursuit of historical knowledge. It includes the liberty to conduct research without fear or favor, to draw conclusions rooted in evidence, and to offer contributions in the public sphere within a context of informed critique and debate. By this measure, the University of Mississippi has plainly infringed on Professor Felber's academic freedom. His termination following legitimate criticism of University donors also highlights how outside funders with ample resources and privileged access pose a real or potential threat to academic freedom, institutional priorities, and due process in personnel matters.

Prof. Felber is a highly respected scholar and researcher. He is widely recognized as a diligent and meticulous scholar of incarceration and the racial, gendered, and class dimensions of criminalization and the carceral state. The OAH's flagship journal, *The Journal of American History*, published Felber's influential article, "Shades of Mississippi: The Nation of Islam's Prison Organizing, the Carceral State, and the Black Freedom Struggle," in June 2018. Colleagues at the University of Mississippi and across the profession have publicly lauded his research, teaching, and service. The [reported reasoning behind and manner of his dismissal](#) from the University's faculty further points to a violation of due process. It also represents an abuse of OAH best practices in defense of academic freedom, which call for clear administrative procedures and detailed record-keeping in situations where academic freedom seems at risk. Professional standards which require just cause

evidence for sanction or dismissal and afford an opportunity to challenge such charges are not simply a matter of personnel practices or protocols. They are at the heart of academic freedom and higher learning in a healthy democracy.

The Organization of American Historians reiterates that academic freedom is fundamental to the integrity of the historical profession and essential for all history instructors in higher education regardless of rank or employment status. The OAH remains committed to advocating and developing best practices for academic freedom. We thus stand together with other professional and learned societies in denouncing the dismissal of Garrett Felber and urging the University of Mississippi to reconsider its troubling decision.

Sincerely,



George Sanchez
President



Beth English
Executive Director



Michael Flamm
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom