



Commissioner Sylvia Rhodea
District 8 | Allendale
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April 9, 2025

Dr. Philomena V. Mantella
Office of the President
1 Campus Drive
3035 James H. Zumberge Hall
Allendale, Michigan 49401

RE: Compliance with Executive Orders

Dear Dr. Mantella,

Thank you for your work on behalf of students at Grand Valley State University. I am writing to share concerns expressed by my constituents and to request that GVSU comply with President Trump's executive orders in order to protect the safety and civil rights of its students, faculty, staff, and visitors, as well as to safeguard the university from potential economic loss resulting from noncompliance. I respectfully request that you bring GVSU into compliance with the following executive orders:

Executive Order 14151, titled "*Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing*," issued on January 20, 2025

Executive Order 14173, titled "*Ending Illegal Discrimination and Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity*," issued on January 21, 2025

Executive Order 14201, titled "*Keeping Men Out of Women's Sports*," issued on February 5, 2025

It is my hope sharing student and community concerns will lead to positive change for GVSU and the students who attend there.

Student Experiences

I have enjoyed having conversations with GVSU students over the past few years, as well as with alumni, employees, and parents of GVSU students. The University touches the lives of many in our community, and the culture it nurtures is important to all of us.

I have found GVSU students to be bright, well spoken, and strong in their convictions. In 2023, students expressed they were thankful for Ottawa County's stand against DEI, and hoped for change with the county's involvement in GVSU's Sex Ed week, which had gained media attention for its BDSM content, and more.

Since that time, numerous students and community members have shared that GVSU is a difficult campus for individuals with religious and conservative beliefs, with many concerns centered around the promotion of DEI. The first day of class is described to frequently include an expectation of students to share their gender identity pronouns, which many disagree with. As students proceed through courses, they report writing their papers in line with their professors' beliefs and expectations rather than their own thoughts, as they don't want to hurt their GPAs, graduation, and ultimately their career paths.

There appears to be a preoccupation with promoting progressive ideologies to the detriment of freedom of religion, conscience, and speech at GVSU. As you are aware, a recent LGBTQ+ art display in GVSU's high-traffic student center was believed to desecrate Mary, the mother of Jesus, and was highly offensive to students of several faiths. One might question the judgement and priorities of GVSU in the purchase of the display.

This fall, while I was on campus in one of the two free speech zones with the Ottawa GOP, a large figure of President Trump was destroyed by students who gathered to loudly protest our booth. On another day, a female employee from an educational building approached the booth yelling, "I AM NOT OK. I AM NOT OK WITH YOU BEING HERE! HOW CAN YOU PROMOTE THIS MAN? HE IS A RAPIST!"

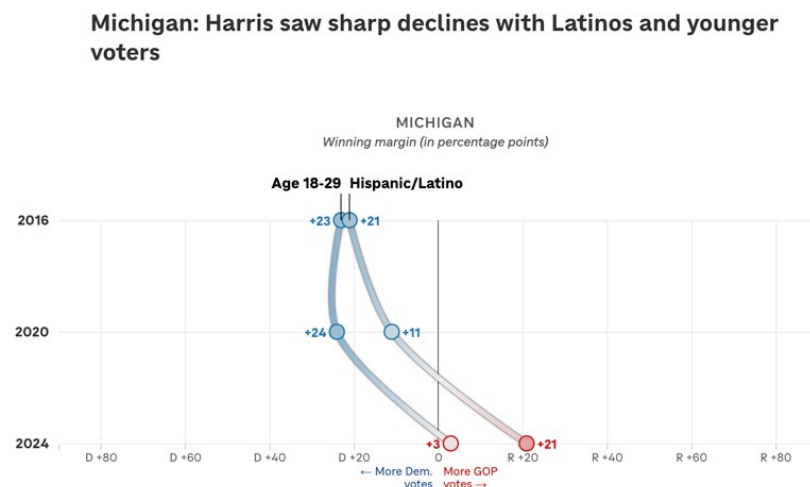
I appreciated another GVSU employee who apologized for her colleague, affirming her own belief in free speech. But this experience and more underscored the stress students are under as they navigate a charged atmosphere and professors who hold strong animosity towards their beliefs and leaders they align with.

Many students expressed how happy and relieved they were to meet our team on campus as they felt they had to largely hide their beliefs and political leanings at GVSU. They were deeply appreciative of conversations with supportive community members, and the opportunity to connect with other like minded students at the booth. Many verbalized they felt alone and unrepresented by University staff.

Parents and employees have also shared concerns about GVSU's aggressive promotion of DEI ideology and policies, which stands in opposition to the values of the majority of people in Allendale and the greater Ottawa County community. With thousands of students attending GVSU in and from one of Michigan's most conservative counties, this is concerning.

In the 2024 presidential election, demographic groups that traditionally leaned Democratic shifted toward the Republican candidate, particularly in swing states. NPR reported in Michigan, "Latinos swung more than 30 points toward Trump, while voters under 30 moved more than 20 points in his direction, leading Trump to win both groups."

This context offers GVSU an opportunity to assess whether its DEI initiatives and progressive stance might be at odds with the perspectives of a significant portion of its student body, prospective students, and staff. Given that DEI was a key issue in President Trump's campaign, it is important for GVSU to consider how its policies align with the political and social landscape reflected in the recent election, and how compliance with President Trump's Executive Orders on these issues may affect students and staff.



Source: NPR, "In this election, demographics did not determine how people voted," January 9, 2025.

These trends suggest that assumptions about demographic voting patterns no longer hold true, and that institutional policies and classroom content should reflect a broader spectrum of viewpoints.

Unique Characteristics of GVSU in Ottawa County

Ottawa County has been ahead of the curve in DEI efforts— both in the early implementation and promotion of DEI (through GVSU, prior county government, non-profits, etc.)— as well as in the community’s recognition of the dangers of DEI ideology and taking action to end its influence in our county.

In 2022, a Statement on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion was shared widely with the people of Ottawa County, which included the text, “Diversity and inclusion, as traditionally defined, are beautiful words and bring value and richness to our relationships, homes, and communities... We love the people of our county, and for that reason, we oppose teachings that divide us.”

In 2023, the Ottawa County Board of Commissioners passed a resolution to change the county vision statement to Where Freedom Rings. The new vision statement recognized the fact that “Where Freedom Rings”—where individual freedoms, parental rights, and freedom of religion and conscience are protected, all people belong.

I have attached both for your review. I share these resources as a reflection of the hearts of those who oppose DEI. We love all people, but we are strongly opposed to the Marxist ideology DEI spreads.

I recognize in many respects, GVSU in Allendale is ground zero for the confrontation between progressive Democratic and conservative Republican beliefs— and at times the politics attached to those beliefs, as many local students from one of Michigan’s most conservative counties attend what is perhaps one of Michigan’s most progressive public universities.

Yet I would love to see conservative students do more than what they describe as “survive GVSU.” I would love to see them thrive on your campus. And as America shifts away from progressive ideologies, I would love for more employees and parents from our community to be proud to be connected with your University. **I believe complying with President Trump’s Executive Orders would be a great starting point to bring needed change to the culture of GVSU, enabling freedom of conscience, speech, and religion to flourish on GVSU’s campus.**

President Trump’s Executive Orders

For these reasons, I respectfully request GVSU make immediate changes to comply with President Trump’s executive orders.

Request to Abolish DEI

Please take all necessary steps to close GVSU’s DEI bureaucracy, including the *Division of People, Equity, and Culture* and the *Inclusion and Equity Institute*, in alignment with many of your peers at public and private institutions, including the University of Michigan. Please discontinue segregated graduation ceremonies, any use of diversity statements in hiring, training, and professional development, DEI in strategic planning, and staff positions historically used to promote DEI. Please adopt merit-based admissions and hiring policies and remove preferences based on race, religion, sex or other characteristics. For transparency, please issue a statement regarding GVSU’s commitment to merit and colorblind equality and full compliance with federal law and guidance.

Request to Protect Women’s Sports

Please take all necessary steps to uphold Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, which requires institutions receiving Federal funds to ensure equal opportunity for women to participate in sports. Institutions

must recognize biological reality and the differences between men and women to comply with federal law and guidance.

Request to Protect Free Speech and Freedom of Conscience

I respectfully request that you expand opportunities for free speech beyond GVSU's current designated free speech zones, and encourage educators to ensure that freedom of speech and conscience is not only permitted, but actively encouraged among students every day in every class at GVSU.

College should serve as a vibrant marketplace of ideas—a space where young people are free to express their thoughts, challenge each other's perspectives, and engage in meaningful conversation and debate. These experiences foster greater ingenuity, strengthen collaboration, and help break through barriers in future work environments. Our youth are America's future, and we need to cultivate an environment where they can communicate openly.

Allendale is blessed with a beautiful campus that holds great potential to prepare our young people not only for successful careers, but also for thoughtful citizenship. I care deeply about the students and faculty of GVSU, and I encourage the cultivation of a politically neutral campus—one where freedom truly rings and students who love America can flourish. I welcome conversations about working collaboratively toward a campus where freedom of conscience and speech are not only protected, but openly embraced and expressed.

Sincerely,



Sylvia Rhodea
County Commissioner
District 8 | Allendale
County of Ottawa

Attachments: Statement on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, and Resolution to Establish "Where Freedom Rings" as New County Vision Statement

CC: Linda McMahon, Secretary of Education