

October 27, 2023

Trustee Renee Knake Jefferson Statement

While I do not speak to the media about the business of the Michigan State University Board of Trustees based on our [Code of Ethics and Conduct](#) (see paragraphs 8 and 9), I am speaking to the MSU community today in light of the [letter](#) from Trustee Brianna Scott, the responses from Chair Rema Vassar in the media, and the [MSU Faculty Senate Resolution](#) calling for Vassar's resignation.

According to an October 24, 2023 Chronicle of Higher Education article, Vassar remarked that I feel "aggrieved" because my colleagues voted for her over me as chair earlier this year. I'd like to set the record straight. But first, assuming this quote is accurate, I would ask Chair Vassar to stop attacking me. There is nothing here to fight over with me. I am not the reason why Trustee Scott wrote her letter, and I am not responsible for Vassar's conduct that is exposed by Scott's letter. This has nothing to do with a trustee's feelings. We are faced, instead, with critical questions of leadership. We must deal with these matters professionally.

Here is what *is* true. I do not feel the least bit aggrieved about not being chair. I was relieved, not aggrieved. I do not aspire to be chair. I did not run for chair two years ago. And I will decline again when, under our new process of rotating the chair, my turn comes. I was willing to assume the role this year only because my fellow trustees asked me to. Two of them changed their minds the morning of the vote, one texted me shortly before the vote and the other sprung the news when she cast her vote live. I have respected their decisions. None of that should detract from the serious information Trustee Scott has brought forward.

In that same Chronicle of Higher Education article, Vassar described Trustee Scott's letter as "an old-style political hit job." One thing I can state without question is that politics are not the issue. Although I am an elected trustee, I view my role as one of public trust and my obligation entirely to the University's interests, not my own. Before my appointment to this Board I had never declared a political affiliation and had never contemplated running for elected office until after I was appointed to this position in 2019. I am an academic and an attorney, and I serve as a volunteer to promote higher education. But for those who see only politics, I am of the view that even politics must defer to higher ethical values – especially when the goal is to serve our students in the public interest.

And it would be strange anyway to accuse Trustee Scott as politically motivated when she, herself, voted to elect Rema Vassar as chair.

I find it regrettable that circumstances compelled a trustee to decide that public exposure is the only viable way to address grave concerns about the leadership on this Board. But we have tried to resolve these issues internally. Since January 2023, Board members have each undergone at least 15 hours of training with three different experts on board governance and communication. We have asked questions and raised concerns that have gone unaddressed.

In full transparency to the MSU community, I want to share with all of you now what I know about the items Trustee Scott included in her letter.

1. Negotiation of Gupta Settlement. During the February 9, 2023, BOT work session, the Board was informed (and no one seriously disputes) that Vassar had engaged in settlement negotiations with Gupta (including authorizing the Board's law firm, Quinn Emanuel, to draft a joint statement). At the time, the Board had not yet been named in the lawsuit. It is also true that the interim president, who was herself a defendant in that lawsuit, communicated to us that the Chair's actions undermined the University's ability to reach a resolution. In short, what Scott reported is accurate.
2. March 31, 2023 Release of the Quinn Emmanuel Report. During the February 10, 2023, public meeting, the Board voted to release the QE Report, but set no deadline for its publication. *After* that vote, Gupta sued the Board. Quinn Emmanuel and our own General Counsel advised the Board to delay the release of the report. Vassar rejected the lawyers' advice and released the report the day Quinn Emmanuel made it final. Again, what Scott wrote is accurate.
3. AG Office Communication Regarding the Nassar Documents. I have no direct knowledge of Vassar's discussions with the Attorney General's office. I have read the State News article quoting Attorney General Dana Nessel as explaining "that Vassar had asked her to send the recent letter re-affirming the demand for the documents' release."
4. Advertisement – Spartan Wealth Management and Vassar. I have seen this advertisement in the Lansing State Journal. I have no other knowledge about it. The picture speaks for itself.
5. Text Messages with Former Trustee. I have read the [Deadspin](#) and [State News](#) articles and seen the text messages produced in response to media FOIA requests. The messages, which involve victim-shaming and fake plots to remove the interim president and University general counsel, speak for themselves.
6. Leak of Claimant Name and Related Investigation. I learned of the claimant's name in the matter involving the former football coach for the first time in the news reports of September 10, 2023. On September 11, the Board learned that a particular member of the Board was alleged to have leaked the claimant's name. I have fully cooperated with the Jones Day investigation, including sitting for an interview and agreeing to a process proposed by Jones Day for a search of my personal phone several weeks ago.
7. February 13 After-Action Review. On September 29, 2023, the independent firm Security Risk Management Consultants briefed the Board about its final After-Action Review report. One of the conclusions found that some members of the Board acted "beyond their expertise" and "their appropriate role." Vassar was one of those four members. A trustee disputed the consultant's findings. Vassar suggested to the consultants that they meet with this trustee before publicizing the final report to address the concerns and take them into consideration. The version of the report released to the public, which is accurately depicted as "watered down" from the original version, speaks for itself.
8. Private Jet Use. My only knowledge about Vassar's use of private jets is that the chair of the Audit, Risk, and Compliance Committee stated during a recent BOT work session she should not have taken the trips. When a question was raised about whether fair market value should be paid under Board policies, Vassar stated, in clear terms, that she would not do so.

9. Interference with the Interim President. I have no direct knowledge about meetings with Lansing officials by Vassar that occurred without the interim president, though I have [read Mayor Schor's statement](#) confirming the meeting. I also have [read the interim president's statements](#) where she does not refute any of the facts alleged by Trustee Scott regarding bullying and overstepping into the president's duties, and calls work with Vassar "challenging."
10. Bylaw Amendment to Chair Selection. The recently adopted amendment changing the chair selection process is a reform that the Board has been considering since at least 2019. Vassar stated during the work session that she would publicly call those of us supporting this change "racist," and she followed through with that threat after the vote. As Trustee Scott wrote in her letter, race played no role in that vote.

I appreciate that Trustee Scott's letter has been referred to Audit, Risk, and Compliance for a full investigation, which will be conducted by an independent third party.

I believe the Board also must consider reforms to our policies and procedures related to ethics, conduct, and conflicts of interest, especially on how we hold each other accountable. Everything we have seen this year reinforces the urgency of that review.

I am proud to serve the University as a trustee. It is an amazing institution of higher learning. I have learned so much about its positive impact on its students, alumni, our state, our country, and the world through the work of our faculty, staff, and administrators. All of us, as trustees, should be laser-focused on advancing the University's interests. My hope is that this moment of transparency through Trustee Scott's letter will allow us to do exactly that in the coming days and years.