

University of Montana faculty opposes Trump's court-embattled travel ban

Keila Szpaller

February 9, 2017

The University of Montana Faculty Senate voted Thursday to "strongly object" to – although not "condemn" – President Donald Trump's executive order affecting travelers from seven mostly Muslim countries.

Roughly a dozen students from UM are from affected countries; none were delayed as a result of the ban, according to UM.

Thursday, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declined to block a ruling that suspended the ban and allowed previously barred travelers to enter the United States.

At UM, the number of faculty and staff from countries affected by the ban has not been made available.

"UM faculty are disturbed by this action and concerned for the people directly affected by the immigration ban as well as by the climate of racial, ethnic, and religious intolerance and hostility that it fosters," reads Thursday's Faculty Senate resolution.

Trump's order also indefinitely suspended admission of Syrian refugees into the United States.

At UM, the Faculty Senate approved the resolution with all but a couple of senators in support. The measure passed after the faculty voted on a split 21-14 vote to "object" to the order rather than "condemn it," a recommendation from Senator John Eglin.

The resolution is similar to one the faculty at Montana State University approved earlier, said UM Faculty Senate Chair John DeBoer. It notes faculty's obligation to protect academic freedom and the executive order's disruption of the lives of academics.

"... This ban offends academic values because it does not reflect informed judgments about who presents the most serious threats to our national security," the resolution said.

Senator Linda Frey voted against the resolution, saying "I think it's politically inauspicious to do this." When she compared Trump's executive order to the previous administration's and said it wasn't discriminatory, a couple of other faculty members interjected.

Senator Abhishek Chatterjee said he isn't the biggest fan of former President Barack Obama, but he didn't take the same actions or target the same people.

"I'm telling you, you're wrong ... initially, the plan (from Trump) was to have a general Muslim ban, right? And the idea was to somehow make this legally possible, and this is the straw that they clutched on," Chatterjee said.

In his presidential campaign, Trump called for banning all Muslim travel to the United States; he has denied the current executive order is linked to religion and argued he wants to keep people safe from terrorism.

The Cato Institute, promoting conservative public policy, has said foreigners from the seven affected nations have killed zero Americans in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil between 1975 and 2015.

At the meeting, UM President Sheila Stearns said the university will be releasing its spring enrollment numbers next week and anticipated a headcount in the neighborhood of 11,000 students.

Stearns and vice president of finance Mike Reid asked faculty to monitor their budgets closely early on in the semester while time remains to make adjustments. The president predicted the university will close out 2017 "in good shape," but she and Reid warned campus units against overspending because budgets are tight.

The president also noted she has been visiting classrooms in order to introduce herself and discuss the relationship state funding has to tuition. She also presented a timeline for planning being undertaken at UM, such as strategic planning and a program review.

In the discussion that followed, several campus leaders expressed concern that the timeline proposed for reviewing programs – and allocating resources to them – was too aggressive.

Paul Haber, head of the faculty union, proposed faculty themselves lead the program review as an option. Haber said he sees reasons to leave the project in the hands of the administration, but he sees more reasons to lead it; the faculty will continue the discussion at another meeting.

Another senator questioned the president's visits to classrooms. Senator Jule Banville said colleagues have told her some of the talks are unannounced to the professor, take 15 minutes of class time, and offer only the administration's perspective on the UM budget.

"A lot of it is her introducing herself, but some of it is the administration's spin on what has been happening at this university," Banville said.