

Editor:

On behalf of the Islamic Society of Greater Youngstown and the Youngstown Area Jewish Federation, we are jointly expressing our deep concern about YSU's decision to non-renew the contracts of Dr. Mustansir Mir, Professor of Islamic Studies (Department of Humanities and Social Sciences) and Dr. Jacob Labendz, Assistant Professor of History (Department of History). The separation from the University of these two scholars will result in the de facto elimination by the YSU administration of two critical academic programs, Religious Studies, and Judaic and Holocaust Studies.

The importance of religion and its influence on world affairs is undeniable. Religion has literally shaped the world in which we live and will continue to do so. It is extremely important for students today to understand world religions, especially Islam and Judaism, and how they impact current life. This understanding will help prepare them for whatever they face personally and professionally, given the diverse and closely interconnected global environment in which we live.

Because YSU has not replaced several Religious Studies faculty members who have either retired or sadly passed away, Dr. Mir, who teaches classes on a variety of world religions, is currently the only full-time faculty member in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences with expertise in religion (the remaining full-time faculty in the department are Professors of Philosophy). His loss will mean the end of the study of religious traditions around the world at YSU, something that clearly will be a detriment to the students and the community at large.

The study of the historical lessons of the Holocaust is equally as crucial. During these perilous, polarized times, where we are seeing a substantial uptick in antisemitism, Islamophobia, and political misappropriation of Holocaust history, it is more vital now than ever that a pedagogically qualified historian be present on campus to teach about and direct programming on this material. Because Dr. Labendz is the only current YSU professor who is qualified to teach Judaic and Holocaust studies, and because of the administration's apparent decision to shrink the footprint of history education at the University, any future efforts to present Judaic/Holocaust opportunities, without an appropriate scholar as a full-time member of the faculty, will dilute the impact of this education to the point that it is rendered meaningless. The history of the Holocaust matters and cannot be forgotten.

YSU has presented itself as a strong promoter of diversity, equity, and inclusion principles. However, the elimination of these two academic programs belies the administration's characterization of a campus environment that is truly committed to these concepts. The retention of strong, detailed, and diverse education in both Religious and Judaic/Holocaust studies will send the message that YSU is committed to its students and their futures. Now is not the time to cut back. The students of today are our leaders of tomorrow, and it is vital that YSU prepare them fully for the challenges that lie ahead.

Accordingly, for the reasons we have stated here, and for the reasons we have articulated separately on behalf of our communities, we strongly urge YSU to reverse its recent employment decisions, retain Dr. Mir and Dr. Labendz, and continue to enhance the study of religion and history in light of the long-term benefits to their students.

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