

At-Large Members of the Steering Committee

Election Slate

University Committee on Academic Governance

February 12, 2026



John Aerni-Flessner (Page 1 of 3)

Unit: Residential College in the Arts and Humanities

Academic Appointment & Rank: Associate Professor – Tenured

Initial MSU Appointment: 2014

Previous Academic Governance Service: The Steering Committee, Faculty Senate, University Committee on Faculty Affairs, University Committee on Faculty Tenure

Also Applied To:



Please explain why you want to serve as an at-large member of the Steering Committee and what qualifies you to do so.

The faculty are the bedrock of our institution. We are the ones who make a career here and who safeguard our values and policies. The faculty are supposed to “steer” MSU—which is why this election is for positions on the Steering Committee. Academic governance is at a cross-roads at MSU. The radically altered funding landscape at the federal level is re-making higher ed before our eyes. The on-campus budget cuts are forcing deep and unsustainable cuts to many of our departments, schools, programs, and colleges. Higher education is under attack by some sectors of the general public and politicians who question public appropriations to support our mission. This is all highly concerning, and is part of what I have spent the last two years as an At-Large Member and Vice-Chair of Faculty Senate pushing back against. It is VITAL that we continue to have vibrant academic governance institutions as the faculty have the freedom and obligation to speak on behalf of the institution and for the students—past, present, and future—who we hope to continue to educate. Faculty voice, vote, and perspective matter and we NEED seats at tables where the key decisions are made.

Can we, MSU faculty, single-handedly beat back the macro forces and headwinds facing higher education at this moment? No. But there are important powers at our disposal in academic governance that we can exercise. This includes both actual power, written into the by-laws of this institution, that give faculty seats at the table with the president and provost and with the Board of Trustees. But we also carry the moral force of being the intellectual custodians of the institution, dedicated to preserving the right of free inquiry and the obligation to share our intellectual discoveries with the community, broadly defined.



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Both of these powers can and should be deployed to protect the vital interest ALL faculty (tenure-system, fixed-term, non-tenure track, and academic specialists) have in the preservation and continuation of one of the best systems of higher education the world has ever seen. There are, of course, aspects we need to improve—no system is perfect—but the role of academic governance is advocating for the system and our needs within it.

In my two years serving as an At-Large Member, I think I have shown good judgement in using the actual levers of power to ensure faculty voice in important processes—passing resolutions through Faculty Senate and chairing an ad hoc committee examining the different ways MSU directly funds faculty research efforts. Senate resolutions should be used when our core interests and principles as a faculty are under threat. Two resolutions I helped author passed this year, one supporting MSU faculty member Lisa Cook and the other calling on our president and Board to reject any “compact” deal with the federal Department of Education that would compromise scholarly integrity. I have done this not by relying on my own intuition but rather by having conversations with colleagues across the institution—outside of my discipline, outside of my own college, and with people I did not necessarily agree with on everything.

These conversations are at the heart of how governance should function. It is messy. It is non-linear. It isn’t always the fastest process. We often have to rely on incomplete information, but at its core, academic governance is about inserting the faculty voice into decision-making processes and expanding the number of people and offices who hear about the interests of faculty. Again, the faculty of Michigan State University are the long-term defenders of the idea of higher education and the value this education brings not just for individual students but for our society and the world as a whole.

I would be honored if you would vote for me to spend two more years representing ALL faculty of Michigan State University as an At-Large Member of the Steering Committee.

Please provide a brief statement about your past efforts and/or future plans to contribute to a collaborative, respectful work environment and to uphold the values of integrity and accountability that are central to shared governance.

I am an associate professor of history in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities. By February 2026 I will have authored two books and co-authored two more in my twelve years at the institution, in addition to many more peer-reviewed journal articles.

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I have also created public-facing scholarly projects in conjunction with my students, projects which helped win me MSU's Teacher-Scholar award in 2020. The residential colleges, where I teach, are one of the bedrocks of our undergraduate experience at MSU. They are places where students who fear getting lost in a big institution find a home with constant friendly faces to help them ease their transition from high school into the university. Being faculty in such a space puts a premium on collaborative work and constant communication—with my faculty peers, with our peerless staff, and with students. A “faculty” meeting in my college encompasses not just tenure-system faculty, but also academic specialists, our recruitment and student services staff, the communications team, and our administrative assistant. We all have to be rowing in the same direction for our program to survive and thrive—and it does! The constant communication and understanding of how various elements of the program and MSU fit together is absolutely required to excel at the job.

In my professional work, I am a historian of southern Africa where I engage in both archival research and oral history collection to write new histories of the people who live in South Africa and Lesotho. Listening is key. Listening with a deep understanding of cultures in which I did not grow up is even more crucial to successfully undertaking this type of work. Even though I work in a discipline that still values single-authored publications, I have made a commitment to co-authored publications—most with co-authors from South Africa, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe. I bring these listening and culturally nuanced skills back “home” on campus in my work in committees, in academic governance, and in the classroom to ensure that I am not simply listening to people but really hearing what a multiplicity of voices are saying about what is important to them.

These are some of the perspectives I bring to my work in shared governance. Over the past two years as an At-Large Member, I have learned so much about how this large institution works and functions. I have been educated about the amazing work done to support our students, the multiple ways that we as an institution support research across fields, and how we position ourselves to do even better. If you will elect me, I will utilize the knowledges I have gained to be an even better advocate for the important role faculty need to play at MSU to make our institution more responsive to our needs. This is all in service of our greater mission—to research and teach in the interest of the public good. May we never lose sight of our land-grant mission.



Natoshia Cunningham (Page 1 of 2)

Unit: Human Medicine

Academic Appointment & Rank: Red Cedar Distinguished Professor and Associate Professor - Tenured

Initial MSU Appointment: 2019

Previous Academic Governance Service: Faculty Senate

Also Applied To:



Please explain why you want to serve as an at-large member of the Steering Committee and what qualifies you to do so.

I am seeking to serve as an At-Large Member of the Steering Committee to represent faculty voices across the university, and to foster communication between faculty and administration. I believe that faculty representation is essential to advancing Michigan State University's mission. I would bring to this role both experience in university governance and a deep commitment to representing the broad and diverse perspectives of our people.

In particular, my service as the Chair of the College Advisory Council for the College of Human Medicine (where I am a tenured Associate Professor in the Department of Family Medicine) and as an appointed Faculty Senator has provided valuable experience in representing diverse faculty perspectives. In my role as Faculty Senator, I recently led a university-wide faculty survey on the One Team, One Health initiative, in collaboration with multiple faculty representatives and leaders, in an effort aimed at ensuring faculty voices were meaningfully and transparently represented in the process. Sharing the results of the faculty survey to Senate, and to the Board of Trustees, in addition to engaging with university leaders, and One Team, One Health leadership, has deepened my understanding of how faculty input can meaningfully inform strategic decisions.

In a time when academic institutions are facing unprecedented challenges, shared academic governance is essential to preserving institutional integrity and academic freedom. Collaborative decision-making ensures that faculty expertise continues to guide the university's responses to evolving challenges. My goal, if I were to be elected in this role, is elevating and representing faculty voices across a broad range of issues and being an advocate for the betterment of our university.



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Please provide a brief statement about your past efforts and/or future plans to contribute to a collaborative, respectful work environment and to uphold the values of integrity and accountability that are central to shared governance.

There is much I do and would continue to do to contribute to a collaborative and respectful work environment and uphold the values of integrity and accountability that are critically important to shared governance. As the current Chair of the College Advisory Council for the College of Human Medicine (and as recent past Vice-Chair of our College Advisory Council) and current Faculty Senator, I am a representative who has earned the trust of the people. My constituents seek me out to share their thoughts and concerns knowing I am here to listen, to serve as an advocate, and to elevate their voices. I also follow through on commitments. I would continue to be a trusted representative for all faculty in this role. I am also experienced in engaging with university leadership and would continue to meaningfully engage with our university leaders and various stakeholders at MSU to ensure strong representation for the faculty of our institution.

(Optional) Use this space to add anything else you would like those considering your application to know, including whether you are willing to serve on multiple academic governance bodies and whether you would prefer to serve on certain academic governance bodies over others.

I am committed to being a voice for the people at MSU. I have the time, interest and bandwidth to contribute to the duties required for this role. I am able to attend all meetings and do the work that is required to be both meaningful and impactful in this role. In my current roles in Academic Governance, I go above and beyond in representing our people, including leading university-wide initiatives, and would continue to fully commit myself to this important work.



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Unit: Agriculture and Natural Resources

Academic Appointment & Rank: Associate Professor – Tenured

Initial MSU Appointment: 2008

Previous Academic Governance Service: The Steering Committee, Faculty Senate, University Committee on Academic Governance, University Committee on Graduate Studies

Also Applied To:



Please explain why you want to serve as an at-large member of the Steering Committee and what qualifies you to do so.

I have been an active member in Academic Governance at the department, college and university levels. I am currently Chair of UCAG as well as a member of Faculty Senate and University Council. As such, I firmly believe that the success of an institution rests upon the willingness to serve on bodies on which one can make the best impact—for ALL those involved. As an At-Large member of the Steering Committee I will be able to serve as a liaison between the Faculty, Academic Congress, Student Bodies and the Provost/President's office regarding matters that are important to each body. I am uniquely qualified to serve in this position given my many years' experience as the current Chair of UCAG and as my past chair of UCGS. I will leverage all of my experiences in governance and as a faculty member to take seriously all matters brought forward, have hard conversations, and ensure fair, transparent and equal decisions, regardless of academic rank or position.

Please provide a brief statement about your past efforts and/or future plans to contribute to a collaborative, respectful work environment and to uphold the values of integrity and accountability that are central to shared governance.

As mentioned earlier, I have extensive experience in Academic Governance. In my recent experience as Chair of UCAG, I have demonstrated the ability to collaborate with a large body of individuals with diverging opinions and bring them together to make a collective decision that is equitable, fair and transparent. In order to achieve these goals, I must not only create, but adhere to, the principles involved in creating respective work environment.



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Successful interactions and decisions are much better served when people feel that their opinions matter and they are being heard, despite perhaps not having the anticipated outcome. My style is to address conflicts and unfair treatment head on, but in a respectful way. Again, all voices matter and should be heard and I will continue to follow this principle if elected as an At-Large Member of the Steering Committee.

(Optional) Use this space to add anything else you would like those considering your application to know, including whether you are willing to serve on multiple academic governance bodies and whether you would prefer to serve on certain academic governance bodies over others.

In summary, I am able, willing and excited to serve as an At-Large Member of the Steering Committee. This position will allow me to continue important work on Academic Governance and serve my constituents in a fair, transparent and equitable manner. It would be an honor to be elected to this important position.

