

August 12, 2026

David Hormuth, M.D.
Chair, Indiana University Board of Trustees

Pamela Whitten
President, Indiana University

An Open Letter to Indiana University Leadership Regarding Trustee Sage Steele

Dear Chair Hormuth and President Whitten,

On Monday afternoon (August 10, 2026), IU Trustee Sage Steele posted the following¹ from her verified X/Twitter account (@sagesteele), quote-posting a news story about Anthony Fauci:

“Where do I go to get permission to waterboard this man?? As he hangs upside by his toes, of course. Anyone wanna join me?”

As I write this two days later, the post has been seen by over 601,970 users, liked by over 8,200 users, and has been flagged by X for potentially violating its rules against violent speech.

It should go without saying that a university official publicly fantasizing about torturing a named physician and encouraging others to join her is unacceptable behavior. While this violent imagery is deeply disturbing at a visceral level, I assume she was not serious, and I doubt anyone believes that a trustee of Indiana University is actually going to waterboard anyone. My true concern is that with this post Trustee Steele has violated the values and ethical standards of Indiana University and tarnished its reputation.

Six months ago, on February 20th, the Board of Trustees met at the Madam Walker Legacy Center in Indianapolis and voted unanimously to adopt the Chicago Principles on Freedom of Expression. I was present for that meeting as a member of the public, and I remember Trustee Steele speaking in support of the Principles. She said they were “a statement about who we are and what we expect of a great public university,” and that “universities carry a very special responsibility” as it relates to engaging with different perspectives. She closed her statement by stating the vote “reaffirms our responsibility to model the values that we hope our students will carry forward...” I agree with every word of that, but I am no longer convinced that she does.

Indiana University’s own Principles of Ethical Conduct, which the Board of Trustees adopted in December 2013 also has something to say about this. They name “respect for the dignity of others” among the core values of this University. They ask that University Community Members “be respectful, fair, and civil,” that they “avoid all forms of harassment, discrimination, threats, or violence,” and that they “communicate ethical standards of conduct through instruction and example.” This Monday, Trustee Steele did not respect the dignity of others. She was not respectful, fair, or civil. She did not directly threaten violence, but she invoked it. She did not communicate ethical standards of conduct through

¹ Original version: <https://x.com/sagesteele/status/2086900985880850890>
Archive version: <https://archive.ph/4AAMB>

example, but rather the opposite. Trustee Steele violated Indiana University's principles of ethical conduct and its stated institutional values, and in so doing she has harmed the entire University Community.

Indiana University operates a renowned school of medicine. It employs physicians as well as federally funded biomedical and public health researchers whose work is public-facing, and who increasingly take hostility for it as a matter of routine. Those people report, in the end, to the Board of Trustees. One member of that Board has now told more than half a million people that she would like to see a physician tortured, and asked who wanted to help. I cannot measure what that does to our University Community Members who hear those words. All I can say is that Indiana University feels less safe now than it did a few days ago.

I love this University and I owe it a great deal, which is why I am taking the time to write this letter. Since earning my Ph.D. in physics at IU Bloomington in 2021 I have witnessed that a degree from Indiana University means something in a room where nobody knows you. Indiana University's standing is the accumulated work of two centuries and of a great many people. That standing is not decoration and it is not indestructible. The Trustees are meant to hold that standing in trust.

Given all of this, I ask you both to say publicly that Trustee Steele's behavior in this case does not reflect the values of Indiana University. I also ask that the Board consider strengthening its own Code of Conduct to discourage this sort of behavior going forward. Finally, I ask that Trustee Steele be invited to respond to the University Community in her own words.

Let me address a couple of potential objections in closing. Chair Hormuth, you have spoken before about the importance of institutional neutrality in higher education, and I appreciate your perspective on that. Institutional neutrality means that a university does not take sides on the contested public questions of the day. But it has never meant that a university cannot say what its own values are, or that it cannot say when the public conduct of one of its own officers departs from them.

Furthermore, this is not an issue of freedom of expression or diversity of thought. All trustees are entitled to their own opinions and are free to share their position publicly in their personal capacity. But publicly wishing violence upon someone and encouraging others to join is not a viewpoint. It is dangerous rhetoric and it is an act against the best interests of the University.

I am sending this letter to you and sharing it publicly on the same day. Trustee Steele's post was public, the values it departs from were adopted in public session by a public body, and the University's response belongs in public too.

Respectfully, and with deep affection for this University,



Justin Vassel
Ph.D. Physics, IUB 2021

Encl: Screenshot of Trustee Steele's post



Sage Steele ✓
@sagesteele



Visibility limited: this Post may violate X's rules against Violent Speech. [Learn more](#)

Where do I go to get permission to waterboard this man?? As he hangs upside by his toes, of course. Anyone wanna join me?



New York Post 🟡 @nypost · Aug 10

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3:42 PM · Aug 10, 2026 · 601.9K Views



541



622



8.2K



134



Post by Sage Steele on Twitter/X. Screenshot taken at August 12, 2026 12:01 PM EDT.

Source: <https://x.com/sagesteele/status/2086900985880850890>