

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

The University Senate

April 11, 2024

Dear President Shafik:

We write this letter as members of the University Senate Executive Committee to express our strong support for you and your presidency as you prepare to testify before the House Education and Workforce Committee of the United States Congress.

Like many Universities across the country, our campus community is responding to the conflict in the Middle East, with a range of opinions expressed through different forms of protest, teach-ins, and symposia. Under your leadership, our University is addressing concerns over antisemitism through the establishment of the Task Force on Antisemitism and providing a venue for debate and discussion through the Dialogue Across Difference program. We have revisited time place and manner designations with regard to protest, and have committed ourselves to addressing Antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Arab, and anti-Palestinian hate through new educational programs and initiatives.

Responding to the tragic events in Israel and Gaza, members of our community have engaged in our tradition of protest and free expression, as we have done throughout our history. While protests are loud and often political in nature, we welcome these manifestations of free expression and open debate and we do so recognizing the importance of protecting the rights of all members of our community to pursue their academic endeavors. However, for the first time in recent decades, we find ourselves facing external challenges from across the political spectrum, exacerbating internal differences.

Columbia University is an institution of teaching, research, and learning, rather than a corporate entity. We have a structure of shared governance rather than shareholders, with the University Senate the third branch of University governance, functioning in a democratic fashion alongside the President and the Board of Trustees, as set out in the University Statutes. As with any democracy with its structures and institutions, there are moments of challenge, even crisis, but these structures and institutions survive, adapt, and, ultimately, prosper because we work together for the greater good of all members of our community.

As set out in the University Statutes, the University Senate shall “work for the advancement of academic freedom and the protection of faculty interests” and “work for the promotion of student welfare and the enhancement of student life.” (Source: University Statutes, Section 23.c. and section 23.d.) The University Senate is a deliberative body of shared governance and a forum for the broad range of opinions, positions, and perspectives that inform and shape University life and policy. The University Senate spans Columbia’s 21 schools, colleges and affiliated schools, with representation from all constituencies —faculty, students, administration, researchers, librarians, administrative staff, and alumni. In addition to its deliberative policy-making role, the University Senate provides oversight and advice to the administration.

Our community has well-established Rules of University Conduct, which provide a framework around protest and public expression on campus. Set out in Chapter 44 of the University Statutes, the Rules were developed by the University Senate with the broad involvement and engagement of our community, and in collaboration with the President and University Trustees. The University Statutes serve as our constitution. There is no place for hatred, discrimination, or prejudice of any kind. Every member of our community must feel a sense of belonging and be safe, seen, and heard. When there are differing perspectives, all members should engage respectfully in the exchange of ideas and debate, learning to navigate the discomfort that comes with that. Our differences are a source of strength, they are a vital and critical part of what makes university communities excel, advancing knowledge and innovation, while nurturing constructive debate and free inquiry.

During challenging and contentious times, the University must rely on tried and true processes. With protections for the rights of the individual, a content-neutral approach, consideration of charges by peers, and a clear disciplinary procedure, the Rules of University Conduct ensure due process, as befits an institution of reason and learning. When there is uncertainty over University policy, and questions regarding origin and implementation, the adherence to established procedure is essential to maintaining the trust of the Columbia Community.

This is a time of raw and heightened emotions. We support you as you seek to develop policies that allow for regulation of the time, place and manner of protest, thereby enabling students who want to avoid protest to do so, while protecting Columbia's traditions of free expression and open debate. The University Senate recognizes the importance of such regulations, while maintaining due process and proper protections, as set out above. As an institution of higher education, our role and reason for being is to educate our students, including when they make mistakes. Where the actions of a small number of students have fallen short of the standards of behavior collectively established by the University's institutions of shared governance, you have responded immediately and decisively. Our students must learn from their errors and, in the process, be allowed the opportunity to restore any harm done.

**We value our University and what it stands for. As you represent us before Congress in defense of our values, we are by your side.** We look forward to continuing to work closely with you in addressing the challenges that face us following the tragic events in Israel and Gaza. **The University Senate is committed to protecting everyone in our community, and we strongly support all efforts to strengthen our community and to ensure that we all feel a strong sense of belonging.**

Sincerely,



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