

Defending Columbia University from the Congressional Assault on Higher Education

April 2024

Dear President Shafik,

We write as faculty, staff, students, parents, and alumni of Columbia and Barnard in anticipation of your appearance before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce on [April 17](#), where you are expected to answer questions about antisemitism on campus. Based on the committee's previous hearings, we are gravely concerned about the false narratives that frame these proceedings to [entrap](#) witnesses. We urge you, as the University president, to defend our shared commitment to universities as sites of learning, critical thinking, and knowledge production against this [new McCarthyism](#).

Rather than being concerned with the safety and well-being of Jewish students on campuses, the committee is [leveraging antisemitism](#) in a [wider effort](#) to caricature and demonize universities as hotbeds of "[woke indoctrination](#)." Its opportunistic use of antisemitism in a moment of crisis is expanding and strengthening longstanding efforts to undermine educational institutions. After launching attacks on public universities [from Florida to South Dakota](#), this campaign has opened a new front against private institutions.

The prospect of Congress calling university presidents to account for alleged antisemitism on their campuses reveals these proceedings as disingenuous political theater.

In the face of these coordinated attacks on higher education, universities must insist on their freedom to research and teach inconvenient truths. This includes historical injustices and the contemporary structures that perpetuate them, regardless of whether these facts are politically inexpedient for certain interest groups.

To be sure, antisemitism is a grave concern that should be scrutinized alongside racism, sexism, Islamophobia, homophobia, and all other forms of hate. These hateful ideologies exist everywhere and we would be ignorant to believe that they don't exist at Columbia. When antisemitism rears its head, it should be swiftly denounced, and its

perpetrators held to account. However, it is absurd to claim that antisemitism—“[discrimination, prejudice, hostility or violence against Jews as Jews](#),” according to the Jerusalem Declaration’s definition—is rampant on Columbia’s campus. To argue that taking a stand against Israel’s war on Gaza is antisemitic is to pervert the meaning of the term.

Labeling pro-Palestinian expression as anti-Jewish hate speech requires a dangerous and false conflation of Zionism with Jewishness, of political ideology with identity. This conflation betrays a woefully inaccurate understanding—and disingenuous misrepresentation—of Jewish history, identity, and politics. It erases more than a century of debates among Jews themselves about the nature of a Jewish homeland in the biblical Land of Israel, including Israel’s status as a Jewish nation-state. It dismisses the experiences of the post-Zionist, non-Zionist, and anti-Zionist Jews who work, study, and/or live on our campus.

The political passions that arise from conflict in the Middle East may deeply unsettle students, faculty, and staff with opposing views. But feeling uncomfortable is [not the same thing](#) as being threatened or discriminated against. Free expression, which is fundamental to both academic inquiry and democracy, necessarily entails exposure to views that may be deeply disconcerting. We can support students who feel real and valid discomfort toward protests advocating for Palestinian liberation while also stating clearly and firmly that this discomfort is not an issue of safety.

As faculty, we dedicate ourselves and our classrooms to keeping every student safe from real harm, harassment, and discrimination. We commit to helping them learn to experience discomfort and even confrontation as part of the process of skill and knowledge acquisition—and to help them realize that ideas we oppose can be contested without being suppressed.

By exacting discipline, inviting police presence, and broadly surveilling its students for minor offenses, the University is betraying its educational mission. It has pursued drastic measures against students, including disciplinary proceedings and probation, for infractions like allegedly attending [an unauthorized protest](#), or [moving barricades to drape a flag](#) on a statue. Real harassment and physical intimidation and [violence on campus](#) must be confronted seriously and its perpetrators held accountable. At the same time, the University should refrain whenever possible from using discipline and surveillance as means of addressing less serious harms, and should never use punitive measures to address conflicts over ideas and the feelings of discomfort that result. Where the University once embraced and defended students’ political expression, it [now suppresses](#) and [disciplines](#) it.

The [University's recent policies](#) represent a dramatic change from historical practice, and the consequences are ruinous to our community and its principles. In the past, Columbia has periodically confronted attacks against pro-Palestinian speech, [ranging from the vile slanders against Professor Edward Said to the reckless accusations from the David Project](#). But where for decades the University [stood firm](#) against smear campaigns targeting its professors, it has now [voluntarily accepted](#) the job of censoring [its faculty](#) in and [outside the classroom](#).

Columbia's commitment to free inquiry and robust disagreement is what makes it a world-class institution. Limiting academic freedom when it comes to questions of Israel and Palestine paves the way for limitations on other contested topics, from climate science to the history of slavery. What's more, students must have the freedom to dissent, to make mistakes, to offend without intent, and to learn to repair harm done if necessary. Free expression is not only crucial to student development and education outside the classroom; the tradition of student protest has also played a vital role in American democracy. Columbia should be proud of having participated in nationwide student organizing that helped secure [civil rights](#) and [reproductive rights](#) and helped bring an end to the Vietnam War and [apartheid](#) in South Africa.

We express our support for the University and for higher education against the attacks likely to be leveled against them at the upcoming congressional hearing. We object to the weaponization of antisemitism. And we advocate for a campus where all students, Jewish, Palestinian, and all others, can learn and thrive in a climate of open, honest inquiry and rigorous debate.

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