

Global Studies Open Letter to President Ryan

May 6, 2024

We the undersigned are faculty, affiliates and friends of the Global Studies Program, one of the largest undergraduate programs in the College of Arts & Sciences. We endorse the letters sent from faculty in other departments and from students deploring the violence on Saturday, May 4th. We echo their demand for accountability for the decisions made by our administration and meaningful efforts to repair relations, including a serious engagement with the demands raised at the encampment. We write to call further attention to the impact the violent suppression of speech calling for a cease fire and a just peace for Palestine has on our mission to educate our students as global citizens.

As scholars and teachers in Global Studies, we think deeply about the connections we establish between the university and the world. We take seriously both our responsibilities as global citizens and our sense of solidarity with marginalized and oppressed communities. These are core values that we strive to cultivate along with our students, and they resonate with much of the rest of the world. Recent votes and decisions at the UN General Assembly and the International Criminal Court have condemned atrocities that have been credibly reported to have been committed in Gaza. Major human rights, humanitarian relief and news organizations have raised alarms about potential war crimes committed by the Israeli Defense Forces and mass starvation used as a weapon, and the US State Department has raised serious concerns over human rights violations in Gaza. This is what our students were demanding that we talk about. Their demands, from a global perspective, are solidly mainstream.

We were dismayed to witness students and colleagues embodying the best of our values and striving to live by them met by militarized violence. This cruel and unnecessary use of public force violated the rights of free speech and peaceful protest of students, faculty, and community members. We were also outraged at the gratuitous pepper spraying and brutal arrests of these students and faculty. We were stunned by the utter silence of President Ryan and Provost Baucom during this sad and ugly display of police violence. The decision-making process for the destruction of the student encampment largely excluded faculty and student organs of governance. The University failed miserably in its mission.

We were even more dismayed when in the aftermath of the militarized operation, President Ryan finally broke his silence with a deceptive letter to the UVA community. Without any proof or documentation, the President asserted that students and faculty violated “long-standing” policies and accused them of “physical confrontation and attempted assault” against the police. These grave accusations seem to fly in the face of eyewitness accounts of those who were at the encampment and those observing from outside the police barricade. These allegations remain baseless. With our UVA colleagues, we therefore **demand a full account and justification of the actions that were taken.** We remain deeply concerned for the safety of our students, and ashamed by the actions of our administrators. We are owed, in the very least, a full explanation.

In addition to our demands for a full and detailed account of the decision-making process that led to the events of May 4, we also urge the administration to act to **ensure immunity and protection for students and faculty who had been arrested. We further demand that the university, in keeping with existing free speech policies, make clear that all kinds of speech – including pro-Palestinians speech – is protected in our classrooms and on Grounds.**

We insist that criticisms of the state of Israel is not inherently antisemitic. We decry expressions of Islamophobia and antisemitism in equal measure, and our hearts break for the staggering loss of life in Gaza, as well as for the lives lost and hostages taken in Israel on October 7th. We recognize the complexity of the current conflict in Gaza, as well as the different views among members of our university community. We respect those differences and want to create and protect spaces for constructive and respectful dialogue. We see this as central to our calling as educators.

Bad faith attempts by external lobbying groups to conflate antisemitism with criticism of the state of Israel diverts attention from the long and violent history of antisemitism on Grounds and thereby exposes Jewish faculty, staff, and students to further violence and intimidation by diluting the very real issue of antisemitism both on Grounds and around the country. In a [recent Chronicle of Higher Education interview](#) with the person who drafted the working definition of antisemitism that is the foundation of the one issued by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), [Kenneth Stern](#), himself said that the misappropriation of the term to quell political speech on college campuses is “a travesty.” Several of us were present to protest the Unite the Rally in 2017, when neither the police nor the administration acted to defend those confronting avowed Neo-Nazis. Both defending Palestinian life and fighting anti-Semitism are consistent with our values.

There must be an alternative to the violent path chosen. Other universities around the country have diffused tensions by negotiating in good faith with protesters and proposing concrete steps toward meeting student demands. We urge you to take steps to repair the harm to our community, with the hope of restoring confidence between students, faculty, and the administration. To do so requires good faith efforts to provide transparency, full information, and steadfast commitments to the protection of free speech and the right to assembly. It is not too late to rise to these challenges, build shared governance, and chart a different course for our community.

Sincerely,

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