

From:

- University of Washington Chapter of the American Association of University Professors
- Washington State University Chapter of the American Association of University Professors
- Whitman College Chapter of the American Association of University Professors

To:

- The Honorable Patty Murray
- The Honorable Maria Cantwell

May 7, 2024

**Re: Attacks on Academic Freedom, Free Speech, and Free Association
at Washington's Colleges and Universities**

Dear Senator Murray and Senator Cantwell:

We are writing today to call your attention to escalating attacks on academic freedom and to urge you to stand with faculty in Washington State in confronting these efforts to stifle free speech, free association, and academic freedom on our campuses. In particular, we oppose the ongoing campaign to censor the study of critical race theory and to deploy the International Holocaust Remembrance Association (IHRA) definition of antisemitism which would prohibit legitimate criticisms of the policies of the state of Israel.

A report by the American Association of University Professors ([Legislative Threats to Academic Freedom](#)) correctly notes that “[t]here is a clear connection” between silencing voices critical of Israeli state policy and censoring “teaching about racism” in the United States. Sadly, a partisan effort to weaponize civil rights law threatens to smother dissent and cast a pall of conformity over our campuses. It is not the role of the government to terminate political debates on campus; indeed, government must *protect* the right of universities and colleges to foster debates on pressing matters of the day. Disagreement and dialogue are central to both intellectual inquiry and democratic self-government.

Antidiscrimination law appropriately ensures a safe and inclusive environment on university campuses. But it is not designed and should not be employed to foreclose the analysis of current conflicts or inequities and the historical conditions that gave rise to them. We believe the [American Civil Liberties Union got it right in a recent letter](#) to the Department of Education: “the federal government is equipped with the standards to

address hostile environment harassment, including when speech is involved. But the IHRA definition of antisemitism is not rooted in the legal protections against hostile environments and instead seeks to prohibit speech based on viewpoint alone.”

Faculty and students are already experiencing the chill of censorship and harassment. Nationally, as has been widely reported, faculty and students who speak, teach, and publish in defense of Palestinian rights have been targeted, doxed, threatened, investigated arrested, and in some cases terminated. At universities in Washington state, faculty have been charged in the complete absence of any documentation or evidence of creating a hostile environment for Jewish students; others have received death threats for speaking at a student-organized Palestine solidarity event and received Islamophobic hate mail rife with racist stereotypes of Arabs as rapists and brutes. Similarly, student leaders of organizations perceived as Muslim (e.g., a Somali student organization) received vicious letters asserting they have no place at the UW or in the US. In this chilling climate, it is vital that the principles of free academic inquiry be upheld on our campuses. ***Any attempt to impose by legal means a highly polemical and widely contested definition of antisemitism amounts to reckless state overreach and directly undermines educators’ responsibility to educate.***

We call on our elected representatives to stand up in defense of the core values of free speech, free association, and academic freedom that provide the foundation for democratic self-government and the realization of the academic mission of Washington’s colleges and universities.

Sincerely,

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