

SACUA Statement Concerning President Ono's Summons to Washington

Dear President Ono,

The Education and Workforce Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives recently summoned you for an interview concerning "pervasive anti-semitism on college campuses." The hearings of this Committee have featured Representatives hectoring university and school leaders, with the sole purpose of undermining the credibility of institutions of higher education. The hearings serve to exacerbate the very real problems of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian racism. At Columbia and other institutions, the hearings have occasioned unseemly and controversial crackdowns on pro-Palestinian student protestors.

As you prepare for your interview, SACUA offers this advice: (1) defend the University's mission of scholarship, research, and teaching and uphold its commitment to intellectual and academic freedom; (2) object to the House Committee's unduly expansive definition of anti-Semitism, which is being used to stifle criticism of Israeli military operations in Gaza; and (3) bear in mind our university's mistakes of the 1950s before acquiescing to pressure from legislators, donors, and alums that would misalign us with the university's values.

(1) Defend the University's mission and uphold intellectual and academic freedom

Diversity of thought and freedom and expression are foundational to the university's mission. In January, the Board of Regents rearticulated the University's commitment to its [Principles of Diversity of Thought and Freedom of Expression](#), which supports freedom of expression as necessary for "nurturing a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community." The activism of the more than 100 students who were until recently encamped on the University's Diag stands within [a distinguished history of political action](#) here at the University. Like today's protesters, the anti-apartheid activists of the 1970s and 1980s encamped on the Diag. Like the students of the Black Action Movement, today's protesters' interrupted the regular running of University affairs.

Early in the morning on May 21, police outfitted in riot gear descended on the encampment and, on short notice, broke it up. Students were tear gassed and manhandled by police; several were hospitalized; and four protestors were arrested. By using force, rather than engaging in discussion leading to resolution, your administration has undermined the mission of the university and the trust of our community. The students will make mistakes in their struggles to protest this war, but faculty and administrators must be held to a higher standard. The use of violence is "a descending spiral, ultimately ending in destruction for all and everybody." (Martin Luther King Jr., 1964)

The administration's sudden actions of May 21 have undermined the good will engendered by the cautious and diplomatic approach taken up to that point. We call upon you to commit to dialogue with the student protestors and to defend our common mission:

to enable vigorous and meaningful dialogue about the most controversial matters in public life.

(2) Object to the House Committee’s disingenuously using the term “anti-Semitism” to stifle criticism of Israeli military operations in Gaza

We agree with the [view of the American Civil Liberties Union](#) that the activities of the House Committee serve to “chill free speech on college campuses by incorrectly equating criticism of the Israeli government with anti-Semitism.” Branding any pro-Palestinian action or statement as anti-Semitic is careless, and only makes it harder to meaningfully address anti-Semitism. The broad constituency of student activists protesting the ongoing massacre and humanitarian crisis in Gaza includes such groups as the [Jewish Voice for Peace](#)—a national organization. So, too, have many faculty been broadly supportive of the protestors, and earlier this year the Faculty Senate Assembly [passed a resolution](#) calling on the University to “divest from its financial holdings in companies that invest in Israel’s ongoing military campaign in Gaza.”

Our faculty and students have many reasons for standing in solidarity with Gaza’s people. The state we serve is home to the largest community of Arab-Americans in the United States. Dearborn is by no means [‘America’s Jihad Capital.’](#) It is full of patriotic, proud Michiganders whose family ties extend to Palestine. Palestinians are among our students; and friends and relatives of University of Michigan students have been among the more than [35,000 people killed in Gaza](#) by the Israeli military since the original October 2023 attack on Israel by Hamas.

We commend the presidents of Rutgers and Northwestern, who chose to work with students to develop [positive commitments](#), such as scholarships for students displaced by war; their democratic approaches are now being mischaracterized by the congressional committee as “anti-Semitic.”

(3) Bear in mind the mistakes of the past before acquiescing to pressure

In 1954 Professors Chandler Davis, Mark Nickerson, and Clement Markert were [called before the House Un-American Activities Committee](#), which was investigating alleged Communist influences in American universities. Instead of supporting the faculty, the president fired Davis and Nickerson and suspended Markert. These decisions sent a chill across campus, impacting hiring decisions, emboldening bullying, and leading scholars to shy from producing politically controversial research for decades.

The University should not repeat the mistakes of the past. We urge you to uphold the right to free expression on campus. Moreover, we urge you to work with the Association of American Universities to rally university presidents against this nationwide assault on academic freedom.

We hope you will stand firm against House Republicans' political maneuvers, as the leaders of public schools [recently did](#). We suggest you remind the House committee that

their efforts would be better spent in brokering a viable, peaceful solution to the conflict in Gaza that does not involve attacks on civilians or mass starvation.

Approved by the Senate Advisory Committee on University Affairs (SACUA) on May 28, 2024