

An Open Letter from Faculty to the Vanderbilt Administration  
regarding the Vanderbilt Student Government referendum  
proposed by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition

Dear Chancellor Diermeier:

We, the undersigned faculty, are deeply troubled by the Vanderbilt administration's decision to suppress a referendum for the adoption of a Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) amendment to Vanderbilt Student Government's constitution. The proposed amendment, initiated by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition and supported by over 1,000 Vanderbilt students, would bar the use of student government funds on a [list of corporations](#) connected to Israeli human rights violations. We write to affirm the right of students to participate in the BDS movement, to advocate for Palestinian rights on campus, and to engage in student governance free of administration interference.

Vanderbilt University has publicly proclaimed its commitment to democratic institutions, through the establishment of Vanderbilt's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and the creation of the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy. We find it ironic and disgraceful for Vanderbilt to describe itself as a beacon of democratic activity while, at the same time, prohibiting the most direct forms of democratic action that students can take.

According to a letter from Vanderbilt Student Government, the university's Office of General Counsel urged the blocking of the proposed BDS referendum. [Legal consultants](#) have confirmed that a BDS amendment to the VSG constitution would not violate any Tennessee or federal laws. Moreover, [three federal courts](#) have held laws barring boycotts to be unconstitutional. We are gravely concerned that Vanderbilt's removal of the referendum from the ballot uses legality as a facade to quash student activism for Palestinian liberation.

Sadly, this would not be the first time that Vanderbilt has stood in the way of student calls for justice. In 1960, the university [expelled](#) civil rights activist James Lawson for his role in organizing Nashville's famous lunch-counter sit-ins. In February 1978, Vanderbilt [crossed](#) the apartheid South Africa cultural boycott picket line, despite significant outcry. In addition to being an early investor in for-profit prison corporation CoreCivic (formerly, Corrections Corporation of America), the university actively [collaborated](#) on research projects with the company, which [settled](#) a forced labor lawsuit in 2023. The expulsion of Lawson cast a long shadow on Vanderbilt's reputation, only partly repaired by his eventual hiring and the establishment of the James Lawson Institute. Vanderbilt's inaction on apartheid South Africa was remembered by students decades later who demanded the university sever its ties with a corporation involved in land grabbing in Africa.

Vanderbilt students have long spoken out on critical issues of moral concern, locally and globally. Their political speech, protest, and collective action should be encouraged rather than discouraged. This is especially true when, as in Palestine today, oppression and

violence are contributing to the suffering of millions of people and the loss of tens of thousands of human lives.

The recent decision to remove the BDS referendum from the upcoming VSG ballot is a step in the wrong direction. We condemn this suppression of student democracy and demand that the ballot referendum be reinstated.

Sincerely,

**Anthony Reed**, Professor of English  
**Laurel Schneider**, Professor of Religious Studies

**Carwil Bjork-James**, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Law

**Candice Amich**, Associate Professor of English

**Samira Sheikh**, Associate Professor of History

**Jessie Hock**, Associate Professor of English

**Anand V Taneja**, Associate Professor of Religious Studies

**Christin Essin**, Associate Professor of Theatre

**Catherine Molineux**, Associate Professor of History

**Shoshana Adler**, Assistant Professor of English

**Andres Pinedo**, Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development

**Mabel Denzin Gergan**, Assistant Professor of Asian Studies

**Carmine Grimaldi**, Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Arts

**Jonathan Karp**, Post-Doctoral Fellow in Culture, Advocacy, and Leadership

**Brooke Ackerly**, Professor of Political Science  
**Lesley Gill**, Professor Emerita of Anthropology

**Dominique Behague**, Associate Professor of Medicine Health and Society

**Kenneth MacLeish**, Associate Professor of Medicine, Health & Society

**Ben Tran**, Associate Professor of Asian Studies and English

**Brandon Byrd**, Associate Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies and History

**Karen Ng**, Associate Professor of Philosophy

**Rebecca Epstein-Levi**, Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and Gender & Sexuality Studies

**Julie Gamble**, Assistant Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies

**Lara Lookabaugh**, Post-Doctoral Fellow in Gender and Sexuality Studies

**Helen Makhdomian**, Post-Doctoral Fellow in English

**Jihan Mohammed**, Lecturer in Sociology

and eight faculty members who choose to remain anonymous.