

An Open Letter on Freedom of Speech at WUSTL

April 19, 2024 (Amended with new information on April 20 at 1:15PM)

Delivered to the administration on April 26, 2024, 12 PM.

Signatures or anonymous support are still welcome, see [link to the form](#) here and below.

A separate letter is being written by alumni. If you are an alum, [please go here](#).

On behalf of concerned faculty, staff, and graduate students, we are writing to express our deep concern at the university's arbitrary and heavy-handed response to recent student protests against Israel's ongoing bombardment and starvation of Gaza.

The students were protesting because of their moral concerns about Israel's U.S.-backed large-scale killing of Palestinian women, men, and children, and Washington University's connection to these events in Gaza. Specifically, they point to the fact that Boeing, a partner of the university, is implicated in the supply of weaponry for what many jurists and scholars have described as a genocidal attack. The students were not violent. They did not destroy property. They simply occupied space. It was disruptive, yes, but offered a great teaching moment for WUSTL. The university's immediate response, with no due process, was to summon WUPD and suspend three students and bar them from campus, as if they were a threat.

We understand that the police removing the student protestors were armed, and at least one student has reported feeling threatened when an officer placed a hand on his gun and looked directly at them. This allegation should be immediately investigated by the University, for, if true, it is not only an unconscionable way to treat members of our community but could have resulted in the student's injury or death. The use of armed guards against our students is an unwarranted, and deeply disturbing escalation, and we hope this will not reoccur on future occasions.

The students suspended have been banned from campus. They depend on university medical care and food services. This is akin to solitary confinement – with absolutely no due process. Representatives of the administration have arbitrarily threatened to increase the punishments, including threats of expulsion. On what basis and through what process and procedure are such harmful actions being taken?

Students who protest in university venues might reasonably expect some kind of disciplinary response. However, the university has deployed double standards in addressing errant student behavior in what appears to be a discriminatory manner.

Consider the events of a few weeks ago, when fraternity and sorority members ran through a dining hall throwing eggs, spitting, jumping on tables, and allegedly using racial slurs

in the presence of Black and Brown campus workers. Were these students immediately suspended? No. Did the university send out an anguished email decrying racist speech and insisting that our privileged students show respect for people who work here?

No. Did the university pledge to do everything it could to address anti-Black and anti-Brown racism on campus? Not even close. But when students publicly express their deep moral concern for the killing of innocent civilians on a scale not seen in years, the university deploys a draconian response.

Even worse, the Chancellor's latest email conflated the two events, suggesting that students taking a principled stand on issues of moral concern are somehow similar to immature students throwing eggs. While both actions indeed violated University rules, the relevant similarity ends there. Assigning equal moral weight and condemnation to a peaceful, conscientious protest and an obnoxious, menacing food fight gravely undermines the administration's credibility.

Threats to academic freedom are also growing at this University. A number of faculty members have been summoned by administrators because of spurious charges that they are somehow showing bias or antisemitism in the classroom for critiquing U.S. and Israeli policies. Statements that Israel is an apartheid state, that it is committing genocide in Gaza, and that it is committing numerous war crimes are well within the mainstream of public political discourse and are fully protected by principles of academic freedom and by the university's own professed commitment to free speech values. Those principles and values absolutely bar any reprisal or threat against any member of our community for making such statements.

No matter where one stands on the ongoing violence against Gaza or whether Boeing is a good associate for the university, one should be concerned that the attacks on freedom of speech and academic freedom have increased significantly in our country and on this campus. These attacks come despite public statements by Chancellor Martin in support of freedom of speech. Paradoxically, the Chancellor's statements invariably come with caveats, saying what students and faculty can and cannot say. According to our own free speech experts, this is absurd. Qualifying and bracketing which ideas are and are not acceptable undermines the very assertion that the university supports free expression.

A [petition is circulating](#) to call for a reversal of the student protestors' suspensions. We demand due process rights for these students, and we demand that the university uphold its own professed positions on free speech and academic freedom.

If you would like to add your name, or add your support anonymously, please fill out this [online-form](#).

On behalf of concerned faculty, staff, and graduate students,

Michael Allen, Senior Lecturer in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design, Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts

Jean Allman, Professor Emerita, African and African-American Studies, Arts & Sciences

Theresa Anasti, Assistant Professor, Brown School of Social Work

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If you would like to add your name, or add your support anonymously, please fill out this [online-form](#).

If you are an alum, please sign [this letter](#) instead!