

Open Letter from WashU Law Students, Faculty, and Alumni

May 1, 2024

Dear Chancellor Martin and Vice Chancellors Gonzalez, Luoma, Wendland, and Wild:

As law students, faculty, and alumni committed to a sense of justice, we are deeply troubled by [Washington University's response to the recent student demonstrations on campus](#).

On Saturday, April 27, a coalition of students, faculty, and activists held a protest in support of Palestine at Washington University's Tisch Park. Multiple eyewitness reports from students paint a disturbing picture of heavy-handed police tactics and suppression of open and free dialogue on campus. Students were met with over 50 police officers brought in from the city and county who proceeded to violently arrest 100 people. Most concerning are the accounts of [police use of force against students and faculty](#), including slamming some to the ground during arrests and [targeting those who were filming the events as they unfolded](#). Following the mass arrests, Washington University has taken the alarming step of [banning students and faculty from campus](#). Students facing suspension are now being [evicted from housing on campus](#).

Besides the violent arrests, students on the scene reported disturbing police tactics. Some reported being threatened with arrest simply for filming police activity. During the police action, Weil Hall was allegedly taken over by officers who ejected students from the building, preventing observation of the arrests taking place. Police photographers were also used to take photos of students and legal observers in attendance.

The administration's characterization of events in their emails to students does not align with the many firsthand reports from the scene. Far from a "substantial threat" to University operations, the demonstration, by all accounts, was calm and without incident in the moments before police moved in. Participants were sitting on the ground eating snacks. Even the police had relaxed and dispersed to sit around the area. The protest's location in Tisch Park on a Saturday also meant that the demonstration was minimally disruptive to the campus at large. The claims of imminent danger are unsubstantiated from virtually all reports on the ground and cast serious doubt on the reliability of the administrators who sent those emails.

We are particularly disappointed that rather than serving as a safeguard, key members of Washington University's administration appear to have actively facilitated and endorsed violence against our fellow students assembling on campus. Absent clear evidence of a safety threat—which has not been provided—the use of force against protesters and the suspension of students and faculty raises serious concerns about the judgment of the responsible administrators.

To bring outside police into our campus to violently arrest students and faculty—who belong on our campus—makes it clear that this administration does not have the safety and well-being of

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students and faculty in mind.

We call on Chancellor Andrew D. Martin, Vice Chancellors Anna Gonzalez, Nichol L. Luoma, Beverly Wendland, and Robert M. Wild, and all other administrators involved in these decisions to reverse the suspensions, publicly retract their inaccurate and stigmatizing characterizations of the protests, and commit to safeguarding students moving forward. The administration must also do everything possible to advocate for the criminal charges against those arrested to be dropped immediately.

Washington University is not obligated to wield its legal authority to restrict free speech to the fullest extent permissible. Universities, as institutions of higher learning, have a special obligation to foster open dialogue and the free exchange of ideas—[a commitment that Washington University claims to uphold](#). Resorting first to heavy-handed enforcement tactics, rather than engaging in discourse, is antithetical to the core purpose of education. It erodes the foundations of a healthy democratic society. We should hold ourselves to a higher standard of intellectual openness and free inquiry than Washington University's administration has demonstrated in handling these events. Washington University must exemplify a more enlightened approach to the free expression of dissent.

Please view the following pages which include 140 Washington University School of Law community members that have signed onto this statement since it was prepared on the evening of Sunday, April 28.