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Academic Freedom Alliance Statement on Campus Protests regarding Events in Israel and Gaza

Since the attack on civilians in Israel on October 7, 2023, American college campuses have been the scene of political rallies, protests, and political statements coming from differing perspectives. The Academic Freedom Alliance takes no position on the politics of the Middle East or attempts to adjudicate competing claims. The AFA does, however, have a substantial interest in how the discussion of those events is conducted and regulated on American college campuses. Universities are now under extraordinary pressure to police the speech and beliefs of members of the campus community. It is essential that universities resist the pressure to do so.

Separate from the merits of any particular controversy, there are several well-established principles that should guide universities in responding to individual controversies. Universities should reaffirm and recommit themselves to principles that help preserve American institutions of higher education as vibrant homes of free inquiry.

Professors must enjoy the liberty to discuss and even promote controversial ideas and to present controversial materials to students in their classes. Professors have an obligation, however, not to take advantage of their captive audience of students by introducing ideas or materials that are not germane to the subject matter of their class. Likewise, professors have a responsibility not to exploit their privileged position to attempt to indoctrinate students or to subject them to political or ideological litmus tests or pressures in their classroom assignments. Nor do professors have a right to compromise the education of their students by conducting their classes in a manner designed simply to advance their favored political causes. Universities must resist calls to censor what is taught in classrooms, but they must also ensure that classes are used for proper educational purposes.

Professors, like other members of the campus community, should enjoy the freedom to speak and act as citizens. When speaking in public in their personal capacity, professors may give voice to controversial and even extreme political and social opinions that others might find offensive or disturbing. When professors at American universities speak in public in a manner that is lawful under the First Amendment, universities should stand behind their right to express such views.* Universities should insist that professors, as well as other members of the campus community, adhere to content-neutral regulations regarding the time, place, and manner of public speech on campus, but universities must strive to apply those rules in an even-handed and consistent manner regardless of the substantive views of those expressing themselves. Universities should refrain from punishing members of the faculty simply because some think their private political



speech is intemperate, uncivil, dishonest, or disrespectful. Professors should be judged and held accountable for their professional speech and conduct, not for their political views.

Professors have no more right than other members of the campus community to disrupt the proper functioning of the university and its activities, and professors, like other members of the campus community, have a right to conduct their activities without improper disruption by others. Universities must take steps to ensure that campus protests do not interfere with the conduct of classes or hinder academic and educational activities on campus.

Members of the campus community have the right to engage in vigorous political debate and even to articulate extreme political views, but they have no right to try to intimidate or menace other members of the community, violate university policies or state and federal laws, or interfere with the education or lawful activities of other members of the campus community. Any violations of university policies should be expeditiously investigated and university rules protecting the integrity of its mission should be stringently enforced. Violations of the law, irrespective of their motivation, should be referred to appropriate law enforcement agencies. Any member of the campus community who chooses to violate laws or the universities own rules and policies should expect to be held accountable for the full consequences of their actions. The university should enforce its policies guaranteeing that the campus serves as a genuine educational and scholarly institution. It is the responsibility of university leaders to ensure that the teaching and research missions of their institutions are not sacrificed on the altar of politics.

The university should serve as a neutral and peaceful forum for robust political and social debate. Universities will be distrusted and ultimately weakened if they are perceived to be inconsistent in their adherence to their own stated principles, understood to be willing to sacrifice their own scholarly mission to political causes, or thought unwilling to secure the physical safety of their community members and the integrity of their operations.

Today American universities are being tested. It is essential that they pass the test by rededicating themselves to their core scholarly missions and acting consistently and in good faith on the principles that preserve free inquiry and open debate.

*We do not here address the special case of religiously-affiliated universities whose contracts with faculty expressly include provisions requiring them to adhere to or not seek to undermine teachings of the sponsoring tradition of faith.