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Dear Members of the Los Angeles City Council:

I am writing on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association to express our deep concern about proposed City Council resolution #14-0002-S67, introduced by Council members Blumenfield and Martinez. This resolution condemns the actions of a group of students at UCLA who in spring 2014 called on candidates for election to the Undergraduate Students Association Council to sign a pledge not to accept free or sponsored trips from organizations that they claim “marginalize communities on the UCLA campus.” The proposed City Council resolution also appears to call on the leadership of the University of California system to take action against the students who organized the pledge. We believe that this resolution clearly threatens the free speech rights of UCLA students.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

The proposed resolution, generally referred to in the media as the Blumenfield resolution, is a response to a call by UCLA student activists for candidates for student

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office to sign what they refer to as the “Joint Statement on USAC Ethics.” Signers of this pledge, who we understand constitute the majority of candidates participating in the election, promised not to accept free or sponsored trips from three organizations or programs: the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and Hasbara Fellowship. In addition, the pledge included a promise that candidates would not accept sponsorship of trips from any organization that “promotes discrimination” or that “engages in any form of systematic prejudiced oppression.” The activists argued that the political agendas of the named organizations or programs are tainted by Islamophobia, ties to anti-Armenian groups and/or other elements that they believe “marginalize communities on the UCLA campus.”

Whether or not one accepts the assertions about these organizations and programs made in the “Joint Statement on USAC Ethics,” we believe there are grounds for concern that the proposed City Council resolution threatens students’ free speech rights. We agree entirely with UC Chancellor Gene D. Block’s statement that “The decision to circulate this pledge and the choice to sign it or not fall squarely within the realm of free speech, and free speech is sacrosanct to any university campus.” Moreover, despite claims made in the resolution, no evidence has been presented that students who refused to sign the pledge were subjected to bullying or that the pledge is part of a larger campaign of intimidation; in any case, allegations of harassment or intimidation should be handled in keeping with the appropriate university mechanisms or by local police. The City Council resolution seems to characterize all criticism of Israel, or of certain organizations and programs, as intimidation and harassment, and its call on the UC administration to take additional measures to prevent what it terms “intimidation or harassment of any student” may thus undermine UCLA students’ free speech rights. It also strikes at the responsibility of institutions of higher education to encourage free and open debate among students and faculty, even on the most controversial issues.

We therefore call on you, as city council members, to oppose the Blumenfield resolution and any other resolution that threatens or violates the free speech rights of students in the University of California system.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Brown', written in a cursive style.

Nathan Brown
MESA President