



**Middle
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Association**
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2 March 2020

Dr. Cynthia K. Larive
Chancellor, University of California, Santa Cruz
chancellor@ucsc.edu

Dr. Lori Kletzer
Executive Vice Chancellor, University of California, Santa Cruz
cpevc@ucsc.edu

Dear Chancellor Larive and Executive Vice Chancellor Kletzer:

We write to you on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern that disciplinary action taken by the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) against graduate students involved in a strike against the university may threaten the immigration status of international students, with particularly dire potential consequences for students who are citizens of Middle Eastern and other Muslim-majority countries.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, MESA publishes the International Journal of Middle East Studies and has over 2,500 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

At the end of the fall 2019 quarter, some UCSC graduate students began a labor action to advocate for a cost of living adjustment to their wages. This labor action has been described as a “wildcat” strike because it has not been authorized by United Auto Workers Local 2685, the union which represents graduate students at the University of California’s campuses. In support of the strike some teaching assistants refused to submit grades at the end of fall quarter for the undergraduate courses in which they taught, and some teaching assistants removed previously posted grades from the system used to record grades.

On 7 February 2020 UCSC’s Office of International Scholar and Student Services sent an email message to international graduate students warning them that “while participation in a wildcat strike is not, in itself, a violation of your immigration status...any actions that result in student discipline or arrest may have immigration consequences, both on your current status and on possible future immigration applications you may make in the United States.” On 14 February 2020 the university announced that it did not intend to provide graduate students with spring quarter teaching appointments if they did not submit their grades from the fall quarter. The UCSC Division of Graduate Studies then began to summon teaching assistants who had deleted previously posted grades to disciplinary hearings. On 28 February 2020, fifty-four of those students, including international students, were dismissed from their teaching appointments for the spring quarter.



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While MESA has no position on the ongoing strike, we are deeply concerned that UCSC's denial of teaching appointments to students engaging in strike action will deleteriously affect international students' immigration status. As you no doubt know, in recent years, it has become much more difficult for students who are citizens of several Middle Eastern and majority-Muslim countries to obtain, renew or extend U.S. visas, and there have been numerous reports of students admitted to U.S. institutions of higher education and holding valid visas being denied entry.

We note that in the past UCSC has taken a firm public stance in defense of students who are vulnerable as a result of their immigration status. For example, on 16 May 2019 George Blumenthal and Marlene Tromp, at the time respectively Chancellor and Executive Vice Chancellor of UCSC, issued a statement declaring that "the University of California system is equally committed to the rights of all students and employees, regardless of immigration status."

We find it distressing that UCSC has now taken disciplinary action that may gravely threaten the immigration status of international students. We therefore call on you and the UCSC administration to refrain for taking any action that may undermine the ability of the university's international students to maintain their immigration status and continue their studies in the United States, regardless of whether or not they choose to participate in the current strike.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', with a stylized, cursive script.

Laurie Brand
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom
Professor, University of Southern California