



**Middle
East
Studies
Association**
of North America, Inc

Headquarters & Secretariat

Georgetown University
Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

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8 April 2024

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President, Pomona College
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Avis Hinkson
Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students, Pomona
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Yuqing Melanie Wu
Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the College,
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Dear President Starr, Vice President/Dean Hinkson, and Vice
President/Dean Wu:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of
North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom
to express our grave concern about several of your administration's
recent actions with respect to student activism in support of
Palestinian rights. These actions contradict Pomona College's
avowed commitment to respect its students' constitutionally
protected right to free speech and their academic freedom, as well
as the democratic procedures of student self-government and the
safety of students on your campus.

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 prestigious *International
Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 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
outside of North America.

On 5 April 2024 Pomona College took aggressive action against a
week-long peaceful student protest, which included an art
installation that represented the "Apartheid Wall" in the Israeli-
occupied West Bank. The protest was organized by the Pomona
Divest from Apartheid student coalition as part of a broader
campaign that included a student referendum on divestment from
Israel that was approved by 81.3 percent of those who voted,
which your administration has thus far ignored. That afternoon, the



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Pomona Dean of Students directed Campus Safety officers to dismantle the installation, which they forcibly implemented while students tried to preserve what they could of it. When student protesters entered Alexander Hall (Pomona’s administrative building) to demand the return of their installation, Campus Safety officers forcibly removed student reporters clearly identified with vests labeled “media” on them, apparently to prevent independent observers from witnessing and recording what was happening.

The president of Pomona threatened all Pomona students in the building with immediate suspension, and those from other Claremont colleges with being banned from campus. Presumably at the direction of the Pomona College administration, the Claremont police department was alerted, resulting in the arrival on campus of at least thirty police officers from the city of Claremont as well as from neighboring cities, at least eighteen of whom were in full riot gear. They entered the building and arrested twenty students from Pomona, Scripps and Pitzer colleges, including one student who was not inside Alexander Hall. The students were taken to the Claremont City jail and booked on charges of trespassing; one student was charged with obstruction of justice.

While they were still at the Claremont city jail the seven Pomona College students who had been arrested received a notice from President Starr stating that they had been placed on “interim suspension from Pomona College effective immediately,” citing a college policy that allows the administration to impose interim suspensions to “ensure the safety and well-being of members of the College, community, among other reasons.” This interim suspension bars students from all the campuses of the Claremont Consortium and prohibits them from virtual activities as well, including classes. These students have thus been rendered homeless, with no access to their dorms, dining facilities or any other Claremont Consortium facilities. The suspension is indefinite and subject to the college’s determination of the conditions for their potential return. Students may submit a petition to review the interim suspension within thirty hours of receipt of the notice. It appears that these students may be subjected to further disciplinary action. In addition, on 6 April 2024 the eight Scripps College students and five Pitzer College students who had been arrested received a notice from Pomona’s president informing them that they have been “banned” from and “designated *persona non grata*” in all Pomona campus spaces including academic ones – which means they cannot attend their Pomona classes.



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Institutions of higher education should be places in which scholars and students can express their views freely. Especially in these fraught times, university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and assembly, as well as the academic freedom, of all members of the campus community. Students, faculty, and staff should have the right to gather, express, and share their perspectives on all facets of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and (if they so choose) to advocate for Palestinian rights without fear of intimidation or disciplinary action.

Regrettably, your administration's forcible removal of the protest art installation prevented your students from expressing their views on an issue of public concern. Pomona College's harsh treatment of the students who entered Alexander Hall constitutes yet another distressing blow to freedom of speech and assembly on your campus. Your invocation of emergency measures in response to a peaceful act of civil disobedience and your decision to deploy militarized police against students expressing their political views are distressing and abhorrent. The students clearly did not present a physical threat to anyone's safety; we note that the Campus Safety message distributed across the consortium stated that while there was "police activity at Pomona Campus," "[t]here is no threat to the community." Finally, the immediate interim suspension of these students and the banning of non-Pomona students from campus represent draconian measures that will no doubt have a chilling effect on free speech and academic freedom on campus.

We therefore call on you to immediately return the art installation materials to students and allow them to reinstate their nonviolent protest. We also call on you to rescind your interim suspension of Pomona students and allow them to return to campus and participate in campus life pending fair and reasonable disciplinary procedures, governed by the right to due process. We further call on you to rescind your banning of non-Pomona students from campus pending disciplinary procedures at their home colleges. We ask you to refrain in the future from bringing the police to campus to coercively suppress student activism. Finally, we urge you to publicly and vigorously reaffirm Pomona College's commitment to respecting the right of your students and all other members of the college community to freedom of speech and assembly, and to academic freedom, including with regard to advocacy for Palestinian rights and divestment by means of peaceful protest and civil disobedience.



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We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Asli U. Bali'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli
MESA President
Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

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