



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

**Headquarters & Secretariat**

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9 April 2024

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Dear President Rosenbury and colleagues:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern about a number of Barnard College's recent actions that call into question its avowed commitment to protecting the right to free speech and the academic freedom of its students, faculty, and staff. In this letter we highlight several of the instances in which Barnard has restricted the ability of students and faculty to exercise their academic freedom and their right to free speech.

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.

According to [media reports](#), on 21 October 2023 Barnard's Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies published a statement on its website titled "Solidarity with Palestine." The Barnard administration proceeded to unilaterally remove the statement from the website and



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notified the department that the statement had violated the college's policy on permissible political activity. Despite requests by department faculty, no explanation of how the statement violated the existing policy was ever provided. On 13 November 2023 the administration unilaterally amended its policies with regard to political activity, expanding the definition of that term to encompass not merely electoral politics (in keeping with the college's status as a tax-exempt, not-for-profit organization) but "comment on specific actions, statements, or positions taken by public officials or governmental bodies at a local, state, federal and international levels." Barnard now requires departments to submit the content of their websites for prior review and approval by the Office of the Provost. As the New York Civil Liberties Union stated in a 19 December 2023 [letter](#) to the president of Barnard College, this imposition of "prior restraint" violates fundamental principles of free speech and the accepted understanding of academic freedom; it also undermines the autonomy of Barnard's academic units and the ability of faculty, individually or collectively, to express their informed perspectives and opinions on issues of public concern. Pen America has also [criticized](#) Barnard's new website content policy.

Last fall Barnard's administration also initiated disciplinary proceedings against three students for hanging Palestinian flags outside their dormitory windows. The administration justified this action by citing a city ordinance that allegedly prohibited hanging flags from windows. In fact, however, New York City has an ordinance that explicitly permits "without limitation" the hanging of flags (along with banners and pennants, "other than those that are advertising signs"). When faculty members pointed this fact out to the administration, it amended campus policy to specifically ban the hanging of flags and retroactively applied them to the three students initially accused of violating the nonexistent city ordinance. Once again, it is hard to see this as anything other than an attempt to suppress students' right to free speech.

In the late fall of 2023, apparently in response to the desire of many students to collectively express their opinions about developments in the Middle East and beyond, your administration –without proper consultation with faculty – adopted a new policy requiring advance notice and prior approval for protests on campus. This new policy was subsequently cited when your administration initiated disciplinary proceedings against at least 19 students for allegedly participating in an on-campus demonstration that took place on 11 December 2023. That demonstration took place in a public space frequented by many students throughout the day, so the basis on which at least some of these specific students were identified as having participated in an unapproved demonstration and subjected to disciplinary proceedings is dubious. We



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also note that, according to media reports, a counter-protest also took place on 11 December 2024; whether it received prior approval from your administration or disciplinary proceedings were initiated against participants remains unknown.

On 20 February 2024 Barnard [further amended](#) its campus policies to restrict all political demonstrations to a specific campus location (Futter Field), to specific hours (2 p.m.-6 p.m.) and to specific days (Monday through Friday). These severe constraints, combined with the requirement of pre-authorization for any demonstration, again constitutes a kind of prior restraint which violates fundamental principles of free speech.

Finally, we note that on 23 February 2024 Barnard's administration [announced](#) that it had mandated the removal of all items affixed to the doors of dormitory rooms and suites. This includes any dry-erase boards, decorations or messages. The placement of items on dormitory room doors to express the identities or viewpoints of the room's occupant(s) is a longstanding tradition at Barnard, as it is at colleges and universities across the country. Your administration claimed that this measure was intended to prevent "isolating those who have different views and beliefs," an assertion which we find not only nonsensical and infantilizing but completely antithetical to the principles of free speech and the standards of academic freedom.

This country's institutions of higher education should be places in which all members of the campus community can express their views freely. In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech and academic freedom of all members of the campus community. This is all the more important now, when violence is raging in the Middle East, our own government is so deeply involved in what is happening, and various individuals and organizations with a political agenda are seeking to vilify and silence students and faculty with whom they disagree.

We therefore call on the leadership of Barnard College to rescind the new policies it has imposed since 7 October 2023 that violate the freedom of speech and of assembly of your students and faculty, as well as their academic freedom. We further call on Barnard to refrain from adopting any policies, or taking any measures, which are likely to exert a chilling effect on the right or ability of students, faculty and staff to freely express their viewpoints on matters of public concern and to advocate for whatever cause they wish. Finally, we urge you to publicly and forcefully reaffirm your commitment to respecting free speech and academic freedom on campus, and to fully protecting the safety and well-being of all members of campus community.



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We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aslı Ü. Bâli'.

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