



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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22 April 2024

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Dear President Gearan 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 grave concern at the decision of the administration of Hobart and William Smith Colleges (HWS) to relieve Dr. Jodi Dean, a tenured professor in the Department of Politics, of her teaching duties because of opinions she expressed in an [essay](#) on Palestine that she had posted online. Whatever one thinks of the perspectives set forth in Professor Dean's blog post, this arbitrary action is an egregious violation of the principles of academic freedom and of the constitutionally protected right to freedom of 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.

On 9 April 2024 Professor Dean posted an essay titled "Palestine speaks for everyone" to the authors' blog of the British publisher Verso, which has published several of her books. On 13 April 2024 HWS President Mark D. Gearan issued a [statement](#) in which he declared: "Not only am I in complete disagreement with Professor Dean, I find her comments repugnant, condemn them unequivocally, and want to make clear that these are her personal views and not those of our institution." While



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affirming the “importance of free dialogue on ideas” and the colleges’ efforts “to create an environment where we can discuss hard issues upon which we may disagree,” Gearan went on to assert that “we can never and will never condone or praise violence, particularly when that violence is directed at individuals based on their religion, race, or national origin.” Alleging that “as a result of Professor Dean’s comments, there now may be students on our campus who feel threatened in or outside of the classroom,” he announced that “Professor Dean has been relieved of classroom duties” pending an investigation.

President Gearan’s statement did not explain how or why HWS students might feel threatened by Professor Dean’s blog post, nor did he suggest that her political views had in any way detrimentally affected her teaching. Your administration has also not cited the specific institutional policies permitting Professor Dean’s suspension. We note that the HWS faculty handbook incorporates language drawn from the statements of the American Association of University Professor (AAUP) regarding academic freedom. Among other things, the organization’s [standards](#) require that a faculty member may be “suspended, or assigned to other duties in lieu of suspension, only if immediate harm to the faculty member or others is threatened by continuance.” No evidence of harm, immediate or otherwise, to anyone at HWS has been adduced by your administration.

On 15 April 2024 Provost and Dean of Faculty Sarah R. Kirk sent an email to HSW faculty and students in which she stated that “Professor Dean has the right to express her views just as President Gearan has the right to find those views reprehensible and to condemn them.” However, she went on to assert that “Hobart and William Smith has the obligation under federal anti-discrimination laws, including Title VI, to investigate and take prompt action where the possibility exists that there is a hostile environment based on national origin, shared ancestry, or other protected classes that may interfere with a student’s ability to learn and enjoy the benefits of an education.” She made no claim that anyone had actually complained that Professor Dean’s blog post had caused them to feel that a hostile environment existed at HWS, nor did she explain on what basis a professor could be suspended before any investigation, conducted in accordance with established institutional procedures, had even taken place. We must therefore wonder whether your administration’s preemptory action in suspending Professor Dean was in fact not motivated by genuine fear of threat or harm to members of the HWS community, but rather by your desire to pre-empt a potentially embarrassing federal investigation of your institution and/or by untoward pressure from donors or others who wanted Professor Dean sanctioned because of her views.



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The principles of academic freedom protect Professor Dean's right to express and disseminate her views to a wider public if she so chooses without fear of sanction, as well as her right to not be subjected to arbitrary disciplinary action. We remind you of the [statement](#) on "Academic Freedom in Times of War" issued by the AAUP on 24 October 2023, which is directly relevant to your disciplinary action against Professor Dean:

It is in tumultuous times that colleges' and universities' stated commitments to protect academic freedom are most put to the test. As the Israel-Hamas war rages and campus protests proliferate, institutional authorities must refrain from sanctioning faculty members for expressing politically controversial views and should instead defend their right, under principles of academic freedom, to do so.

We therefore call on you to immediately rescind your decision to suspend Professor Dean and allow her to return to classroom teaching. We further call on you to refrain from adopting any policy, or taking any measure, which is likely to exert a chilling effect on the right or ability of students, faculty and staff to freely express their opinions 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 and upholding free speech and academic freedom on your campus, and to fully protecting the safety and well-being of all members of the campus community.

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