



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

Headquarters & Secretariat

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Center for Contemporary Arab
Studies

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Committee on
Academic Freedom

August 8, 2025

Tom Stritikus
President, Occidental College
president@oxy.edu

Kathryn Leonard
Dean of the College, Occidental College
leonard@oxy.edu

Vivian Santiago
Dean of Students, Occidental College
garaysantiago@oxy.edu

Nora Kahn
General Counsel, Occidental College
nkahn@oxy.edu

Board of Trustees
Occidental College
trustees@oxy.edu

Dear President Stritikus, Deans Leonard and Santiago, Ms. Kahn and Trustees:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern at the decision of Occidental College to subject three students (who wish to remain anonymous) to investigation and disciplinary action for seeking to exercise their constitutionally protected right to protest. Your administration's actions in this regard, which may result in the students' suspension or expulsion, threaten the right of all members of the Occidental College community to freedom of expression and academic freedom as well as to due process.

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.



Re: Student investigations

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According to [The Occidental](#), on 25 April 2025 some thirty students sought to stage a protest at the inauguration of Occidental's new president, Thomas Stritikus. The protest was reportedly directed against the college's refusal to divest from companies complicit in Israel's war on Gaza and a heightened police presence on campus. A confrontation ensued outside the venue; the protesting students contend that they were treated brutally by Campus Safety officers and private security guards.

Soon thereafter, the college announced that it had engaged an outside law firm to investigate the incident. Students have raised plausible [concerns](#) about the neutrality of the law firm as well as about Occidental's [Right to Dissent and Demonstration Policy](#), which was recently revised, in response to pro-Palestine activism, to significantly tighten restrictions on student protest. On 31 July 2025 *The Occidental* [reported](#) that disciplinary charges had been brought against three students allegedly involved in the 25 April 2025 incident. Hearings in the three cases were held in late July and early August, and the students are now waiting to learn what the college has decided. One Occidental student [noted](#) that these proceedings "could result in the most extreme punitive measures towards students for protesting since the college's suspensions of Vietnam War protestors."

In these fraught times college and university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech, academic freedom and physical safety of all members of the campus community. We call your attention to the [statement](#) issued by MESA's board of directors and its Committee on Academic Freedom on 6 May 2024, which denounced actions by college and university leaders to delegitimize and repress campus advocacy opposing Israel's war on Gaza.

We therefore call on Occidental College to take seriously criticisms of the investigative and disciplinary processes to which these students were subjected and ensure that they receive the due process to which they are entitled. We further call on you to refrain from harshly punishing students for exercising their right to protest. Finally, we urge you to publicly and forcefully reiterate – and implement – Occidental College's avowed commitment to respect and defend the right of its students, faculty and staff to freedom of expression, including the right to protest.

We look forward to your response.



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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 A. Brand'.

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