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11 December 2023

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Dear President Hartzell 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 alarm at the decision of the University of Texas, Austin (UT Austin) to relieve Parham Daghighi and Callie Kennedy, both graduate students in the School of Social Work, of their fall 2023 teaching assistant work assignments. In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect freedom of speech, academic freedom, and due process. Regrettably, UT Austin's effective termination of Daghighi's and Kennedy's teaching assistant positions represents a violation of all three principles.

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.



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On 16 November 2023, apparently in response to concerns expressed by several students in their “Women and Madness” course about the mental health challenges they were facing because of the war in Gaza and the UT Austin campus climate, Daghighi and Kennedy sent a joint message to all of the students in the course via Canvas, the university’s learning management system. The message noted the “mental health implications” of the ongoing war in Gaza and “the suffering many of our students, staff, and faculty are experiencing on campus” and stated that they did not support what they viewed as “the University’s silence” regarding such suffering. It also directed students to several on-campus resources, including UT Austin’s Center for Mental Health and Counseling.

On 22 November 2023, School of Social Work Dean Allan Cole issued letters to Daghighi and Kennedy notifying them that “effective immediately” they were “relieved of this work assignment and will not have contact with the students or responsibility for the Women and Madness course.” Dean Cole’s stated grounds for this disciplinary action were that Daghighi and Kennedy’s message was “unprompted,” “unrelated to the course,” and “inappropriate given the setting.” These allegations are contradicted by the [actual text](#) of Daghighi and Kennedy’s message, which various media outlets have reproduced. We deem the disciplinary action taken against Daghighi and Kennedy in response to their 16 November 2023 message to constitute a violation of the principles of academic freedom, the norms of which extend to teaching assistants. UT Austin’s avowed commitment to academic freedom has been stated in various forms, including the [UT System Regent’s Rules and Regulations](#), the establishment of UT Austin’s [A1 Committee of Counsel on Academic Freedom and Responsibility](#), and the [2018 letter from then-President Gregory L. Fenves](#) to UT Austin’s Faculty Council.

Dean Cole further alleged that the message was sent “without the approval of the supervising faculty member.” We are not aware of any UT Austin policy shared with Daghighi and Kennedy as part of their hiring or training for their teaching assistant positions that requires all communications between them and their students to be pre-approved by the supervising faculty member. We also note that Daghighi and Kennedy have asserted they shared a draft of the message with their supervising faculty member who provided feedback on the message content and then supported their sending it to the students enrolled in the course. It thus appears that they were terminated in order to sanction them for expressing their opinions, in direct violation of UT Austin’s professed commitment to academic freedom and the US Constitution’s protection of free speech.



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The university's infringement of academic freedom is further aggravated by its complete disregard for due process, as set forth in UT Austin's own explicitly articulated standards. Dean Cole's dismissal of Daghighi and Kennedy appears to violate UT Austin's Handbook of Operating Procedures 9-2050, "[Teaching Assistant and Assistant Instructor Grievance Procedures.](#)" These policies require that any administrator other than the president or provost must formally notify teaching assistants "in writing, with copy to the provost," of "his or her intent to seek the provost's approval to proceed with immediate discipline." Thus the approval of the president or provost is required when a teaching assistant is being disciplined. Those policies also state that teaching assistants "may appeal this request in writing to the provost" within a specified number of working days after "receiving the administrator's notification." Dean Cole's letter to Daghighi and Kennedy was not a notice of intent but rather a notice of immediately effective disciplinary action, and it was issued without ever asking Daghighi and Kennedy about the allegations made against them or offering them an opportunity to respond. We also note that while Dean Cole's letter was copied to the Vice Provost for Advocacy and Dispute Resolution, it did not contain any reference to seeking the provost's approval, acting with the approval of the provost, or transmitting a decision taken by the provost or the president. It thus seems clear that Dean Cole's action violated UT Austin's own procedures.

We therefore concur with the assessment of UT Austin's chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in their 26 November 2023 [letter](#) to Provost Sharon Wood and Dean Cole that "Dean Cole's actions violate Mr. Daghighi and Ms. Kennedy's academic freedom, and...they are in clear violation of policies and procedures of The University of Texas at Austin." We join the university's AAUP in calling for the immediate rescinding of Dean Cole's arbitrary disciplinary action against Daghighi and Kennedy and their reinstatement as teaching assistants. We further call on UT Austin's leadership to publicly and vigorously reaffirm its commitment to respect the constitutionally protected right to free speech and the academic freedom of all of its students, faculty, and staff, as well as their right to due process.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



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

cc

Pauline Strong

President, UT Austin Chapter of the AAUP

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