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June 15, 2021

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Re: Censorship of Dr. Laila Shikaki's Graduation Message in Support of Palestine

Dear Dean Florio, Mr. Oliva, and Ms. Llewellyn:

We are writing on behalf of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) and Palestine Legal to express concern regarding a recent incident involving Dr. Laila Shikaki. ADC is the largest grassroots organization promoting the civil rights of Arab Americans and immigrant communities in the United States. Palestine Legal is a legal advocacy organization dedicated to protecting the civil and constitutional freedoms of those in the United States that speak out in defense of Palestinian freedom.

Dr. Shikaki contacted our respective organizations after her personal message of "Free Free Palestine" was removed from her slide on your university's virtual graduation presentation held on May 20, 2021. When Dr. Shikaki initially asked for an explanation as to why her message was censored, the university events office told her it was in violation of guidelines that forbade content considered "defamatory, libelous, obscene, immoral, or fraudulent to St. John's University." She subsequently received apologies from Nunziatina A. Manuli, the director of the Office of University Events, as well as Dean Gina Florio for the reason that she was provided and the implication that advocating for Palestinian liberation fell under the terms of this policy. Dean Florio clarified to Dr. Shikaki that "advocating for Palestinian liberation is in no way defamatory (or anything else indicated in the policy that you were directed towards)."

Nonetheless, Dean Florio and Ms. Manuli affirmed the decision to censor the message, claiming that it was "political speech" that violated the school's policy that personal messages on commencement slides were to be limited to "content neutral" sentiments and those that were "celebratory in nature." It is unclear which policy is being referenced here, as Dr. Shikaki was not made aware of such guidelines for commencement messages.



Moreover, other slides that were included in the virtual commencement presentation included messages such as “Black Lives Still Matter” and quotes from Ayn Rand and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., all of which are arguably political speech and not content neutral. The inclusion of these messages and the exclusion of Dr. Shikaki’s suggests that such a policy was not being consistently applied and that messages in support of Palestinian rights were unfairly singled out for censorship.

Finally, we note that Dr. Shikaki’s message was deeply personal and celebratory to her. She has dedicated her doctoral career at St. John’s in support of Palestinian freedom dreams. Her dissertation exploring Palestinian autobiographies focused on how this writing asserted “a self that has been undermined by anti-Palestinian discourses.”¹ To have her message in support of Palestinian freedom censored by the institution that has supported her work exploring Palestinian identity and anti-Palestinian discourses is painfully ironic.

Dr. Shikaki’s personal message was ultimately reinstated on the school’s website on June 7, 2021,² only after her persistent demands, long after the virtual commencement ceremony was over. Her slide, moreover, remains unchanged on the YouTube video of the ceremony.³

We are deeply troubled by the steps taken against Dr. Shikaki and the removal of her message. The action the university took has severe implications for Palestinian students and faculty as well as others who speak out in support of freedom, justice, and equality for Palestinians at St. John’s. As your university attempted to silence a Palestinian student, a historic uprising sparked across the occupied Palestinian territories and the world in response to Israel’s ongoing ethnic cleansing campaign and apartheid policies. During this time, both of our organizations have witnessed a dramatic increase in reports of harassment, intimidation, and censorship of students and employees across the country who speak out in support of Palestinian rights.

As an institution of higher education, St. John’s should be encouraging the free expression of ideas, not hindering it. According to St. John’s own policies, “All members of the St. John’s University community, which includes students, faculty, staff and administrators enjoy the right to freedom of speech and expression that is consistent with the University mission and its Catholic character and Vincentian tradition. St. John’s seeks to foster an environment of global harmony and the incorporation of diverse perspectives.”⁴ Moreover, according to the Student Handbook, St. John’s supports the right of University community members “to examine, to discuss and to advocate any issue and to express any opinion, both publicly and privately, within constitutionally valid limitations, set by local, state or federal law.”⁵

We welcome the reinstatement of Dr. Shikaki’s slide. However, we seek clarity on how and why the slide was removed in the first place as well as the guidelines relied on to make such a determination. Further, we seek

¹ Bethany Sattur, *Congratulations to Dr. Laila Shikaki for passing her dissertation defense*, ST. JOHN’S ENGLISH DEPT. (April 10, 2021), <https://stjenglish.com/congratulations-to-dr-laila-shikaki-for-passing-her-dissertation-defense/>.

² St. John’s University, *St. John’s Graduate-Level Virtual Commencement and Degree Conferral Ceremonies, Class of 2021*, Dr. Laila Shikaki, <https://vgrad2.z19.web.core.windows.net/stjohns/252/ii/#303915>.

³ St. John’s University, *St. John’s College Graduate Virtual Commencement and Degree Conferral Ceremony*, YOUTUBE (May 20, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUTN33vqtfs&list=PLXL9CrEeaO8ua3pDsbKR7-tYAZrObT5Q&index=5>.

⁴ ST. JOHN’S UNIV., HUMAN RES. POL’Y MANUAL, POLICY 1009 - SPEECH AND EXPRESSION (May 12, 1993), <https://www.stjohns.edu/about/administrative-offices/human-resources/policy-1009-speech-and-expression>.

⁵ ST. JOHN’S UNIV., STUDENT HANDBOOK, SECTION 3: POLICIES AND PROCEDURES (August 1, 2016), <https://www.stjohns.edu/about/leadership-and-administration/administrative-offices/office-provost/division-student-affairs/student-handbook/section-3-policies-and-procedures>.



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information on any recourse students or faculty may have if their speech on Palestine, or any topic, is censored. Lastly, we ask that St. John's issue a formal apology to Dr. Shikaki for the harm caused.

In addition to seeking an explanation and an apology, the purpose of our correspondence is to ensure that St. Johns does not again take similar action. Both our respective organizations can serve as a partner in not only reviewing relevant information, but also providing input on language and training that can help avoid similar actions from being taken in the future.

We want to thank you in advance for your consideration and would appreciate a response by June 22, 2021. Should you have any questions or wish to set up a time to discuss this further, please email Ms. Leila Hamouie at leila@adc.org and Meera Shah at mshah@palestinelegal.org.

Thank you,

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