



Amira Mattar <amattar@palestinelegalsupport.org>

Silencing your students' speech

Amira Mattar <amattar@palestinelegal.org>
To: vpsa@butler.edu, feross@butler.edu

Wed, Oct 21, 2020 at 10:18 AM

Frank E. Ross III
Vice President for Student Affairs
704 W Hampton Dr
Atherton Union, Room 200
Indianapolis, IN 46208

Via email to vpsa@butler.edu and feross@butler.edu

Dear Vice President Ross:

We are writing to express serious concerns regarding efforts to silence student voices on your campus. Over the past few weeks, off campus provocateurs sparked a censorship campaign against the Boycott and Safe Protest 101 event and art show. Although the event went forward without formal censorship, the harassment campaign has resulted in cyberbullying, turmoil on campus, and retaliatory bias complaints against organizers. Your campus-wide October 17 email amplified and lent credibility to baseless claims of antisemitism, exposing your own students to heightened harassment and condemnation despite claiming to seek a "climate of acceptance."

If you attended the Boycott and Safe Protest 101 event and saw the art show, you would know that the events were about the rich history of boycotts as a tool for achieving social justice and about the right to protest. The art show included posters about the farm workers grape boycott, South Africa apartheid boycotts, and boycotts for Palestinian rights. If you did not attend, you can find out more about the art show [here](#).

First, by reiterating complaints against the event in a campus-wide email, you lent an air of official approval to the complaints without any type of investigation, serving to further spread and weaponize the unfounded accusations of antisemitism. The concern in your email - that the poster event was antisemitic - falsely equates advocacy for Palestinian freedom with antisemitism. Second, your email seemed to encourage Student Government Association (SGA) resolutions that reinforce a distorted definition of antisemitism. Your email sends a clear message to your students that support for Palestinian rights is not welcome at Butler. We have heard from Butler students that after your email was sent, students were no longer open to having conversations about the resolutions and the very real silencing impact the resolutions would have.

Standing up for Palestinian rights and against Israel's discriminatory actions through individual purchasing decisions and collective economic action is the type of thoughtful political engagement that you should applaud in your students. Instead of encouraging students to learn more about the impact our consumer choices can have, you have, perhaps unintentionally, put your thumb on the scale to lend approval to a resolution that condemns this form of economic activism and a resolution that adopts a distorted definition of antisemitism that has long been used by the Israeli government and its allies around the world to try to impede calls for justice and equality. You can find out more about how this redefinition has been abused [here](#).

If the silencing impact of your email was unintended, we urge you to apologize to the sponsors of the event and to clarify that the event and the accompanying art show were not discriminatory. If you wish to educate yourself about the context of this censorship and harassment campaign, you can find out more in our report [The Palestine Exception to Free Speech: A Movement Under Attack in the US](#).

We have also heard that while faculty who support the resolutions were allowed to speak at last week's SGA meeting, faculty cannot speak at this week's meeting including those who oppose the resolutions. While we do not know the details of this discrepancy, if this directive came from administrators in order to restrict the voices of concerned faculty, it is a shocking manipulation of student governance on campus. We urge you to look into this matter and inform faculty that they have an equal right to participate in this process regardless of their stance on the resolution.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,
Amira Mattar

Amira Mattar
Michael Ratner Justice Fellow | Palestine Legal

55 Exchange Place

New York, NY, 10005

[PalestineLegal.org](https://palestinelegal.org) | (917) 370-4424



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