



National Lawyers Guild of Chicago

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May 10, 2024

President Paul Alivisatos
University of Chicago
5801 S. Ellis Avenue
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We the undersigned lawyers, legal experts, and legal workers write to the University of Chicago out of great concern for the repression of free speech on the university's campus. It has come to our attention that the University's administration is sending students to disciplinary hearings that carry the threat of sanctions rising to suspension or expulsion for participating in protests in solidarity with Palestine, and that the University's administration has taken steps towards sanctioning the campus' chapter of the National Lawyers Guild (NLG) for speech related to the genocide in Palestine. We believe these actions violate the students' First Amendment rights, University Policies and Regulations, and are in conflict with the University's commitment to freedom of expression.

Since its founding, The University of Chicago has prided itself on being a safe haven for free speech. In 2014, The University of Chicago reaffirmed its commitment to free speech and expression by articulating and adopting the "[Chicago Principles](#)." First Amendment scholar, and Edward H. Levi Distinguished Professor of Law, Geoffrey R. Stone stated that "the University has a solemn responsibility not only to promote a lively and fearless debate and deliberation, but also to protect that freedom when others attempt to restrict it." These sacrosanct "Chicago Principles" have served as an inspiration for numerous other universities' free speech policies. As you wrote last year, with this unique position in the landscape of higher education "[comes an obligation to model the tough work of practicing free expression](#)."

The University has been a historic site of student social engagement, including throughout the 1960s when students held demonstrations, occupied school buildings, and engaged in civil disobedience to support the Civil Rights Movement, and to advocate for an end to the Vietnam War. The University's commitment to free speech and expression has ultimately endured and made it a stronger institution. However, this culture is under attack—not from outside forces or agitators—but by the University's own heavy-handed, censorious, and ham-fisted response to students expressing support for Palestine.



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At the time of drafting of this letter, more than 34,000 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli army. Thousands more are injured. Children have been traumatized, orphaned and have had limbs amputated. In response, protests have erupted in the streets and campuses across the world. Students of conscience at the University of Chicago from all backgrounds—including a number of Palestinian and Jewish students—have engaged in actions on campus to make their voices heard on the issue. Such actions are the very lifeblood of any university espousing a dedication to free speech and expression. The University has nevertheless chosen to take punitive actions against those who implore campus leaders to “disclose” all University investments and to “divest” all material support for Israel. Such sanctions will materially harm these students’ academic and future professional lives. The effect of the sanctions or threat thereof will ultimately stifle rigorous inquiry and chill the very freedom of expression on which the University prides itself.

In its harsh stance against the students and their NLG chapter who have raised their voices in solidarity with Palestine, the University has betrayed its highest principles, and places itself on the wrong side of history. For free speech to exist at all, it must be vigorously defended in times of profound tension and disagreement. As the Palestinian people face what the International Court of Justice determined to be a “plausible genocide,” it is imperative that the University of Chicago not suppress the voices of those who choose to support their struggle. Such a tragic and contentious political event is precisely when free speech and expression must be given necessary space to breathe. Now is the moment the University must honor its duty - as you articulated - to “model the tough work of practicing free expression.” This is precisely not the moment to restrict speech that challenges people to think and act with conscience.

We the undersigned, collectively call upon President Alivisatos and the University of Chicago to immediately drop all disciplinary actions against its students who have raised their voices for Palestine, and remove sanctions against the campus chapter of the National Lawyers Guild.

Sincerely,

The Chicago Chapter of the National Lawyer Guild and supporting organizations, law professors, lawyers, legal workers and law students:

Organizations:

Chicago Appleseed Center for Fair Courts

Chicago Community Bond Fund

First Defense Legal Aid

Illinois Prison Project



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