

Dr. Williams Re: Allegations of Free Speech Violations, Threats Against Organizers of Film Screening

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Dear Dr. Williams:

I write on behalf of the Maryland office of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) to request an explanation from Montgomery College regarding allegations that school's handling of controversy surrounding a film screening about the impact of pro-Israel advocacy on American political views, including allegations that school staff threatened discipline against students and faculty who planned to attend the event.

As you know, the college's Faculty for Justice in Palestine and the Arab Society Club had followed school procedures and scheduled a screening of the documentary, *The Occupation of the American Mind*, followed by a panel discussion about U.S. media bias in reporting facilitated by professors Dr. Katya Salmi and Dr. Ellen Olmstead. Twenty minutes before the event occurred, you apparently sent out a campus wide email summarily declaring the film antisemitic and saying organizers "should forgo its viewing."

Although your email did not explicitly announce the forced cancellation of the screening, CAIR has received complaints from students who allege that school administrators threatened students who were waiting in line to attend the film screening, saying they would 'face disciplinary action' from the Office of Student Life if they watched the film. The screening did not go forward and has not yet been rescheduled.

As faculty and students discuss ideas and debate different topics, public institutions of higher learning have a responsibility to ensure that their First Amendment free speech rights are protected on campuses without fear of retaliation or intimidation. Our civil rights group has observed an alarming trend of attempts by anti-Palestinian groups and actors to cancel, discourage and derail events designed to raise awareness about issues related to Israel and Palestine. We received over 3,500 complaints in the final months of 2023, a sharp rise. Many of those complaints involve attempts to restrict free speech at schools.

Sadly, supporters of the Israeli government have repeatedly made false accusations of antisemitism against students and faculty who support Palestinian human rights in an effort to silence their activism on college campuses. This recent incident at Montgomery College appears to be another example of this pattern. Half of the experts interviewed in the documentary you publicly condemned as antisemitic are Jewish-Americans.

Although CAIR has not viewed the film, we do know that it is incredibly dangerous to summarily level accusations of antisemitism against films simply because they are critical of the Israeli government. Just as it is not Islamophobic to criticize the influence of pro-Saudi Arabia lobby groups on American politics and media outlets, it is not antisemitic to criticize the influence of pro-Israel lobby groups on American politics and media outlets. Academics have studied and discussed these issue for decades and must be able to do so without being smeared and silenced.

With all of this in mind, we ask you to ask the following questions:

1. Did you order the cancellation of this event?
2. Did Montgomery College staff threaten students or faculty with disciplinary action if they proceeded with the event?
3. Will you allow the organizers of this film screening to reschedule this event and host it without interference from the school?

If any Montgomery College staff did indeed threaten students, we ask you to take appropriate action to hold them accountable and ensure that such violations of the school's academic and First Amendment obligations do not occur again. We also call on you to personally apologize to the student body for publicly disparaging the work of the diverse group of faculty and student organizers who arranged the film screening.

Finally, we ask that you make it clear that the organizers may reschedule and host this event without interference or threats.

We look forward to your response.

With thanks,

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