



# Huron University College Faculty Association

4 June 2024

## **Re: Support for Student Encampments**

The Huron University College Faculty Association (HUCFA) wishes to publicly express support for our students' rights to assemble and protest on campus, free from threats or interference.

The violence in Israel/Palestine has been profoundly impactful for students, faculty, and staff at Huron, as well as at King's and Western. Many of us have family or other close ties to the region. Understandable feelings of fear, grief, and anger are widely felt, and call for us to find ways to show compassionate concern to one another, even when we must express our differences frankly and sometimes publicly.

Over the last few weeks, due to the scale and urgency of the ongoing humanitarian disaster in Gaza, students across North America (Turtle Island), including here at Western University, have set up solidarity protest encampments. The level of civilian suffering caused by the current Israeli military campaign in Gaza has been horrific. "[A]t least 36,479 Palestinians [have been] killed and 82,777 [have been] injured in Gaza," according to the latest update from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.<sup>1</sup> Many thousands of those killed, injured and displaced have been children. Much of the civilian infrastructure, including health care and education systems, have been destroyed. Seemingly to no avail, the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court prosecutor, and countless governments and NGOs have repeatedly called for an immediate end to the violence, release of hostages, and the delivery of desperately needed medical and food aid to the civilian population.

This is the context in which the encampments have sprung up, and students have taken action to express their grief and anger, and to insist that the leading institutions of our society – the news media, corporations, governments and universities – should cease to provide active or passive support to the continuation of the violence.

HUCFA values the rights of our students to speak and assemble and to remain safe and protected from harm while doing so. We welcome their efforts to express vocally their grievances and aspirations, their criticisms of the university, and their proposals for change. We acknowledge the remarkable diversity of voices and intersectional nature of these encampments, which include members from many different activist and faith communities including Jewish, Muslim, Indigenous, Black and LGBTQ2S+ student leaders who insist that all social justice and liberation causes are intrinsically connected.

HUCFA also acknowledges and reaffirms the rejection by the protest organizers of all forms of oppression and discrimination, including those associated with Islamophobia, antisemitism, and anti-Palestinian racism. We reject all forms of bigotry and stand in solidarity with all victims of violence, and we support our students in doing the same.

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<sup>1</sup> See the United Nations OCHA, *Humanitarian Situation Update #174 (Gaza Strip)*, which cites data from the Ministry of Health in Gaza: <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-174-gaza-strip>

We also recognize that the specific student demands -- "disclose, divest, boycott, and amnesty" -- are open to contestation and critical discussion. But this fact makes it all the more important that the debate should be protected and not interrupted by heavy-handed interference. Willingness to make space for these difficult conversations is crucial to the mission of the university and lies at the very core of the academic enterprise.

For this reason, we have watched with profound disappointment as administrators at many universities have thwarted student protestors' requests for earnest discussion or have mischaracterized the encampments in ways that are clearly meant to justify their dismantling for 'safety' reasons. And yet, for all the supposed concerns around safety, by far the biggest threat to the student safety has come from university administrators summoning security and police forces to evict protestors by using militarized tactics, including tear gas and plastic bullets. Students have been subjected to police violence and frivolous charges, but also to arbitrary and punitive academic sanctions, denied in too many cases their basic rights as members of the academic community: to debate, to learn, to study, to graduate. In some cases, faculty members have also been subjected to violent arrest and threats for being involved in encampment activities or for supporting student protestors. Last weekend, University of Toronto professors were threatened with reprisals for their actions in support of the encampment there. This is an outrageous threat to academic freedom and basic civic and democratic rights, misrepresented as an attempt to promote safety.

In recent days, the Western University administration has publicly expressed a desire that the encampment protest should end. But the administration has been inconsistent in their approach and slow to engage meaningfully with the students, while continuing to make contestable allegations against the protestors in public communications. We urge Western's administrators to do better and to foreground an earnest openness to the students' concerns in these discussions. It would be disastrous, and a betrayal of the university's mission, if Western's administrative leadership were to forcibly evict protesting students from the very campus where their eagerness to debate and to advocate for justice have been nourished by their professors and fellow students.

We join the Canadian Association of University Teachers in [asserting](#) that "the forcible removal and heavy-handed arrests of peaceful student protestors who pose no demonstrable threat to campus safety are inimical to the mission of post-secondary institutions and contrary to the democratic rights expressed in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms." We agree with our colleagues at [KUCFA](#) that universities must be spaces "committed to the sharing, developing, and mobilizing of knowledge for the common good [and] also have a responsibility to defend the right of academic staff and students to critique their practices and contribute to social change through dialogue and action."

We urge the entire university community to unite in opposing any crackdown on dissent or suppression of legitimate civic engagement by Western, King's, and Huron students. Our campuses should be places of learning, listening, and caring for one another as co-learners who, despite our disagreements, value and protect our shared right to speak and be heard.