

Statement of
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before the

Committee on Education and the Workforce
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I am David Schizer. Thank you, Chairwoman Foxx, and thank you Ranking Member Scott, for inviting me to testify today.

In the wake of Hamas's barbaric atrocities on October 7th, there has been a chilling surge of antisemitic incidents across the globe and, unfortunately, on the Columbia campus as well. As part of the university's response, President Shafik asked me to serve as one of three co-chairs of a new Task Force on Antisemitism. I'm here today to share some of the Task Force's initial findings and recommendations. There is a lot to do—and we aren't yet where we need to be—but we are making real progress.

Before I get into the details, I will explain why the Task Force's work is so important to me. One reason is obvious. Columbia is my home. I've been on the faculty for twenty-six years, including ten years as dean of the law school from 2004 to 2014. I also have devoted years of my life to combatting antisemitism, including as CEO of American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee or "JDC," a Jewish humanitarian organization.

There is another reason why it is so important to me personally for Columbia to provide a welcoming environment for Jews and everyone else. That reason is grounded in my family history.

My grandfather grew up in a village in Western Ukraine. His grandfather was lynched in a pogrom. A few years later, he almost met the same fate. A group of antisemitic thugs put my grandfather up against a wall and were about to shoot him, but he managed to get away. This near-death experience persuaded him to leave Ukraine, and he arrived in New York harbor a few months later.

So what did my grandfather do? He taught himself English in the public library and took whatever work he could find. Eventually, he was able to enroll in Columbia Teachers College. That changed his life. It offered him a fulfilling career as a Judaic studies teacher in a Hebrew school. His son became a lawyer, and so did his grandson, who is here before you today.

Columbia had the same transformative impact on the other side of my family. My mother got a scholarship to go to Barnard College and Columbia Law School, where she was one of just twelve women in her class. Her brother (my uncle) also got a scholarship to go to Columbia College and Columbia Medical School.

This is a long way of saying that Columbia is not just my professional home; it is my cause. I am inspired by what the university has done for my family and for so many other families like us. I know the difference it makes in the lives of my students. For well over a century, Columbia has been a welcoming place for people of diverse backgrounds from all over the world, including Jewish families like mine. It is critical to preserve that proud tradition.

So my work on the Antisemitism Task Force has special meaning for me. An added bonus is that I work with two talented and dedicated co-chairs, Ester Fuchs of the School of International and Public Affairs and Nicholas Lemann of the Journalism School, as well as twelve other distinguished senior faculty from across the university. Every day, I am inspired by their wisdom, energy, and commitment.

But our job has not been easy. In the past six months, we've heard too many heartbreaking stories from Jewish and Israeli students. For example, one of my students who wears a kippah was approached in the law school lobby by another student who said, "F*** the Jews." Another was spat upon at a protest. A student wearing a shirt with an Israeli flag was surrounded by protesters, pinned against a brick wall, and told to "keep f***ing running" when he broke free. When I heard about this, my first thought was of my grandfather being pushed up against a wall in Ukraine. This is simply unacceptable.

We were heartbroken to learn that many Jewish, Israeli, and other students feel unwelcome in student groups having nothing to do with the Middle East merely because of their real or perceived ties Israel. Their Zionism and belief in a Jewish homeland should not disqualify them from joining a dance group or volunteering to work with NY City public school students. This sort of pressure—signaling that Jews are accepted only if they reject a core part of their religion and identity—sounds like old-fashioned bigotry from long ago. Again, this is simply unacceptable in 2024. Indeed, it would be wrong to exclude or harass anyone based on their religion or identity, whether they are Palestinian, Black, Asian, Latino, LGBTQ+, female, or members of any other group.

Every Columbia student is entitled to feel at home on our campus. Jewish and Israeli students deserve no less. This is not negotiable. Columbia's Jewish and Israeli community is large and their experiences vary. Some students are less affected than others. The climate for Jewish and Israeli students also varies across Columbia's seventeen schools. But the complaints from those who have come forward are harrowing and unacceptable.

So although there are problems at Columbia, many capable and dedicated people are working hard to address them. Our task force has been in close touch with President Shafik, her leadership team, an impressive group of faculty and staff from across the university, as well as students, graduates, and parents. We have strong support from David Greenwald, Claire Shipman, and their colleagues on Columbia’s Board of Trustees. We also regularly seek advice and share ideas with the leadership of Hillel, Chabad, antisemitism task forces at other universities, leaders of the Jewish community, and experts from a range of other institutions.

Our task force has sought to identify steps that will have the most immediate and sustained impact on students feeling threatened or isolated because of their identity. We began by focusing on the many campus protests since October 7, which have contributed to a tense campus climate. Last month, we issued a report on the rules governing protests, which offered four main recommendations.¹

First, Columbia needs better rules about where and when protests can be held. The right to protest has to be protected, regardless of subject matter or viewpoint. It is a core part of the university’s commitment to free expression and academic freedom. At the same time, the university also has to ensure that protests don’t disrupt classes and other activities. To strike this balance, the rules should allow protests only in designated locations on campus, not in academic buildings. We are very pleased that President Shafik and her leadership team have already implemented this idea—indeed, they did it three weeks before our report was issued. This is a major step forward.

Our report’s second main recommendation is that the university needs to be more effective in enforcing its rules. Our report identified a number of reasons why enforcement has fallen short, and we suggested ways to deal with them. For example, we have called for more proactive responses when violations are taking place, a more streamlined process for filing complaints, more time to investigate them, and the release of aggregate data about our disciplinary processes. I’m pleased that the university has worked to implement these (and other) ideas to make enforcement more effective.

Third, we also have recommended enhancements and clarifications to the university’s antidiscrimination rules. Years ago, the University launched a major initiative to combat gender-based misconduct. We recommend a comparable effort to combat antisemitism—and, indeed, other forms of hate and discrimination. We know that President Shafik and her leadership team are committed to this goal.

¹ The Task Force’s report is attached as an appendix.

Fourth, the university needs to avoid double standards. For example, when members of a group say that particular phrases or comments interfere with their ability to learn and work, should the University defer to them? In recent years, this sort of deference has been commonplace, for instance, when women, Black and transgender students have registered concerns in discussions of sexual assault, policing, and transgender rights. But the response has been different when Jewish and Israeli students lodged similar complaints after October 7. There has not been the same deference. Instead, the focus has shifted from the impact on the audience to the intent of the speaker. While there are policy justifications for either approach, the university cannot use one approach for Jews and another for other groups. Speaking only for myself, I personally would lean in the direction of allowing more speech, even when it is disturbing or offensive. But either way, Jews need to receive the same treatment as other groups. The university agrees that a consistent approach is needed.

While our task force began with these four recommendations about rules, we are hard at work on many other issues as well. Next month, we will issue another report spotlighting our students' experiences, drawing on over 20 listening sessions across the university. We also will make recommendations about how to incorporate content on antisemitism in student orientation and other training, how to define antisemitism in these contexts, the work of our student services office, student groups, and more. We will issue additional reports next year, and will conduct methodologically rigorous surveys and qualitative research to shed more light on how antisemitism manifests at Columbia

When the university combats antisemitism and other forms of hate, it is essential also to protect academic freedom. Vibrant debate is the hallmark of a great academic community. Needless to say, members of our community are free to hold different views on the Israeli government and its policies, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Just as Israelis regularly criticize their own government and its policies, it is appropriate (and not antisemitic) for others to do so as well.

Nevertheless, antisemitism can still emerge in debates about Israel. For example, it is not appropriate to make assumptions about the views of American Jews on Israel or to attribute Israel's policies to them. In addition, certain criticisms clearly are antisemitic. For example, the use of antisemitic stereotypes and tropes in these critiques is antisemitic, as are efforts to rationalize or endorse the murder of Jews or the destruction of the state of Israel. That is well outside the bounds of policy critique. It is threatening and unacceptable. But we can and should debate the policies of Israel as a nation-state, just as we do for other nation-states across the globe.

Even though our Task Force focuses on antisemitism, we know that Jews and Israelis are not the only ones targeted in this difficult time. Our recommendations can also bolster efforts to combat other types of bigotry.

In all this work, we are mindful of a university's solemn responsibility to teach the next generation. Our students must learn to think critically, seek knowledge, cherish and defend liberty, and build a better world.

To do that, we must never shy away from the great issues of the day. Our University must always strive to shed the light of reason on the defining challenges of our time. To advance our mission, we must be willing to express strong views, follow evidence and arguments where they lead, and confront painful truths. As part of this process, members of our community inevitably will disagree.

But even as we express competing views, a University is at its best when we all strive to state our position with civility and collegially. Making the case in this way shows not only skill as an advocate, but also human decency, respect for shared values, and respect for each other.

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I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you and look forward to answering your questions.

Appendix

[Report Number 1: Columbia University Task Force on Antisemitism, Columbia University's Rules on Demonstrations](#)