

Statement of

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before the

Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Columbia University's efforts to address the rising antisemitism on our campus and within our community. Columbia strives to be a community free of discrimination and hate in all of its forms, and we condemn the antisemitism that is far too pervasive today. We have a responsibility to listen and to respond to our Jewish community.

Antisemitism is antithetical to Columbia's mission, goals, values, and teachings. It has no place on our campus, and I am committed to doing everything that I can to confront it directly. It is distressing that some in our community have acted in a manner that is inconsistent with our values. I am deeply pained by the reports of members of our community feeling harassed and targeted because of their identity or faith. We have significant and important work to do to address antisemitism on our campus and to make sure that Jewish members of our community feel safe and welcome.

In early October, I outlined my plan and vision for Columbia University in my inaugural address, focusing on our efforts to be a university that educates citizens and leaders, generates ideas to solve the world's problems, and is deeply embedded in local and global communities. Three days later, that vision was put to the test by the devastating brutality of Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel. Soon, it became clear that these horrific events would ignite fear and anguish across our campus. For our thousands of Jewish and Israeli students, the attack had deep personal resonance. Many in our community had family or friends who had been killed or taken hostage. Israel's very survival appeared to be at stake. For many other Columbia students, the war in Gaza is part of a larger story of Palestinian displacement as well as a humanitarian catastrophe that also affected many in our community.

The University began responding immediately after the terrorist attack on October 7. We worked to contact those directly affected by the attack and to identify the forms of support we could provide our community members—both in the region and on our campus. I attended a vigil for the victims of the Hamas attack on October 9 and connected with members of our community who were dealing with deep distress.

Regrettably, the events of October 7 brought to the forefront an undercurrent of antisemitism that is a major challenge for universities across the country. Like many others, Columbia has seen a rise in complaints of antisemitic incidents on campus. We are taking these complaints seriously and have implemented a number of initiatives to eradicate this hatred and

ensure safety on our campus. Trying to reconcile the free speech rights of those who want to protest and the rights of Jewish students to be in an environment free of harassment or discrimination has been the central challenge on our campus, and many others, in recent months.

As protests grew, we worked to secure the campus and ensure the safety of our students. We restricted access to our campus to those with valid Columbia identification, increased the public safety presence across all of our campuses, brought in external security firms, and added resources to our existing safety escort programs.

It also became clear that our policies and structures in place were not well designed to cope with the unprecedented scale of the challenges we faced. To address this, I along with my colleagues immediately put in place changes. We updated our policies and procedures to respond to the events on our campus, with the goal of ensuring safe and responsible events such that all members of our community can participate in their academic pursuits without fear for their safety. We launched an updated reporting and response process in an effort to make it easier to report allegations of hate speech, harassment, and other forms of disruptive behavior, including antisemitic behavior. This included improved training processes on Title VI and reporting obligations for staff working with students and groups, enhanced reporting channels, and supplementing internal resources through a team of outside investigators. We are in the process of establishing an office with the sole purpose of investigating and responding to allegations of discrimination, including antisemitism, in our community.

In October, we also quickly formed a Task Force on Antisemitism with the purpose of addressing the root causes behind the antisemitic incidents at our University by independently identifying problems and offering solutions. Thus far, the Task Force has done important work, and we are already working to implement many of its recommendations. These steps will be further supported by our longer-term efforts, which include a review of our event policies, revisions to orientation sessions and mandatory training for students to specifically address antisemitism, and additional investments in scholarship and programming that elevate campus debate on difficult issues.

Some of these steps have provoked strong reactions from students, faculty, and outside groups across the ideological spectrum, but we believe they were necessary. We do not, and will not, tolerate antisemitic threats, images, and other violations. We have enforced, and we will continue to enforce, our policies against such actions. We believe we can confront antisemitism and provide a safe campus environment for our community while simultaneously supporting rigorous academic exploration and freedom. This is my highest priority right now at Columbia, and I believe we are moving in the right direction. There is, to be sure, much more work to do, and we welcome feedback from our students and other members of the Columbia community, from Jewish leaders and organizations, and from this Committee.

I have approached our response with four principles: ensuring the safety of Columbia's students and faculty; demonstrating care and compassion; balancing freedom of speech while ensuring members of our community feel safe and welcome; and using education to address the problem of antisemitism.

Safety is a Top Priority

Safety is paramount and the University will take the necessary steps, no matter how unpopular, to secure Columbia's campus and apply rules around protest, harassment, and discrimination consistently and fairly to everyone. After October 7, Columbia took action to ensure the physical safety of our community, and to make clear that Columbia condemns and prohibits antisemitism in any form. On October 12, we brought law enforcement onto our Morningside Heights campus to ensure the safety of our community at a protest for the first time in more than 50 years. On an ongoing basis, we increased the public safety presence across all of our campuses, brought in external security firms for additional support, and added resources to our existing safety escort programs. This included establishing regular communication with the New York City Police Department, ensuring they were either present or on standby for all major events, including vigils and demonstrations.

Despite our immediate actions, I was personally frustrated to find that Columbia's policies and structures were sometimes unable to meet the moment. The student disciplinary process at Columbia typically handled 1,000 student conduct cases per year, most of which related to academic dishonesty, the use of alcohol and illegal substances, and one-on-one student complaints. Today, student misconduct cases are far outpacing last year. Further, the University's time, place, and manner policies for events were not designed to address the types of events and protests that followed the October 7 attack. They also lacked details about consequences for violations. We are actively working, and will continue to work, to continuously improve our policies and processes.

a. Updated Event Policies

We modified our events policies, which clarified the rules for campus demonstrations. The University designated demonstration areas that are available for student protests during set hours. These locations are intended to be prominent and central, while limiting interference with ongoing University activities and ensuring that students who wish to stay away from these demonstrations can avoid them. If students wish to hold a demonstration outside of one of these designated areas, they must seek approval. All demonstrations require two working days' advance registration to ensure that Columbia has time to make necessary safety preparations. Finally, students may not promote a demonstration on campus until after their registration is approved. The policy also lays out a clear procedure for adjudication of alleged violations and consequences for students and student groups who break the rules. University leadership is working with the University Senate—a faculty-led University-wide policymaking body—and relevant internal stakeholders on a longer-term review of our event policies.

Having clear and strong policies is important. Enforcing them is equally critical. We have taken disciplinary action against individual students who have violated our policies. We have ongoing investigations into complaints made against faculty and staff members. In November, we suspended two student groups—Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace—after the groups repeatedly violated our policies and held an unauthorized demonstration on November 9. Additionally, on March 24, an event took place at a campus residential facility that the University had previously barred—twice—from occurring. While the

investigation is still ongoing, a number of students have been suspended in connection with policy violations related to this event.

b. Task Force on Antisemitism

I also established Columbia's Task Force on Antisemitism. The Task Force is led by three prominent Jewish members of our faculty. Their charge is to develop a forum for feedback and suggest improvements. The Task Force has been at the core of the University's response to antisemitism and has met with representatives from all 17 schools at Columbia to learn more about what our Jewish community is encountering on campus.

The Task Force was entrusted with three critical efforts: first, to assess the events and other causes contributing to the pain in Columbia's Jewish community; second, to review the relevant policies, rules, and practices that affect our campus; and third, to propose other methods to help the entire community understand the effects of antisemitism at Columbia. To inform their efforts, the Task Force hosted listening sessions to better understand the experiences of our community.

The Task Force recently released their first report, which focused on the University's Rules on Demonstrations. The report endorsed Columbia's new Interim University Policy for Safe Demonstrations aimed at promoting First Amendment rights while ensuring student safety and allowing all students to participate fully in campus life. The report also called for stronger enforcement of our policies, a goal toward which we are diligently working. The report shows we have much work to do, but its praise of the new Demonstration Policy is a heartening indication that we are moving in the right direction. The Task Force will be releasing additional reports, and we will continue incorporating their findings into our ongoing efforts to make Columbia a welcoming environment for all.

Demonstrating Care and Compassion for All

Columbia has long sought to be a welcoming, thriving community for a diverse community of students and faculty. As such, we must demonstrate care and compassion to everyone. Today, Columbia is home to about 5,000 Jewish students. Our students benefit from a vibrant Hillel Center, housed in the Kraft Center for Jewish Student Life, which provides religious programming and other events for the Columbia community, and a network of student groups and dedicated faculty and staff who are committed to creating safe and welcoming spaces for Jewish life on campus. We also have an active Chabad chapter on campus and a strong partnership with the Jewish Theological Seminary where we share joint academic programs.

Our Palestinian students and faculty have also been affected as their families and friends suffer through a humanitarian crisis. I have heard from them too in my listening sessions and we have made support available to them through our student affairs network, mental health and well-being services, and doxing support group.

I recognize that a problem as deeply entrenched and critical as antisemitism must be addressed with consistent communication between University leadership and our broader community. It was therefore important to me to open a direct channel of communication with

students to ensure we were incorporating a diverse array of feedback. I have had about 20 meetings with groups of students to discuss these issues. In the months after the October 7 attack, I began hosting smaller biweekly listening forums where students can share their feedback directly. These sessions are meant to be safe, respectful, and compassionate spaces for students to express their thoughts and to engage in meaningful dialogue. So far, more than 90 students have participated. I plan on continuing with these listening forums which are often emotional but incredibly valuable opportunities for students to have dialogue across different perspectives.

Upholding Freedom of Speech and Ensuring Members of Our Community Feel Safe and Welcome

Today, the war in Gaza is creating deep divisions and has sparked intense debate. As a global university, it is our role to foster an environment devoted to examining and to debating difficult issues that affect our world, including this conflict. In fact, at times like these, Columbia’s mission—to support research and teaching on global issues—is even more critical.

Columbia is committed to “ensur[ing] that all members of our community may engage in our cherished traditions of free expression and open debate.”¹ Freedom of speech is a core democratic principle and foundational to scholarship and research. It allows our differences to be a source of strength, a critical part of what makes university communities like Columbia excel as incubators of knowledge and innovation. We believe that Columbia’s role is not to shield individuals from positions that they find unwelcome, but instead to create an environment where different viewpoints can be tested and challenged.

We understand that viewpoints will inevitably conflict, and therefore, to fulfill Columbia’s mission, we must uphold both freedom of speech and mutual respect. We will not allow freedom of expression to be used to countenance intimidation or discrimination. It is essential that debates and disagreements at Columbia are rooted in academic rigor and civil discourse. No political debate can justify antisemitism or any form of bigotry; protests and debates should not make Jewish students or any other member of our community feel unsafe.

Making Long Term Progress through Education

I believe education is the ultimate solution to eradicating antisemitism and all forms of hate. That view is supported by research from the Anti-Defamation League. My approach to the task is informed, in part, by my own experiences. I was born in Alexandria, Egypt. When I was four years old, my family’s land and property were seized by the Egyptian government as part of political upheaval in Egypt. We fled to the United States with little money and few possessions. Seemingly overnight, I was an immigrant growing up in the American South—Georgia, Florida, and North Carolina—during the desegregation era and amid significant racial tensions. My public schooling allowed me to engage with and learn from people with a wide array of backgrounds and experience overcoming discrimination firsthand. That experience gave me the

¹ *Rules of University Conduct*, COLUM. UNIV., <https://universitypolicies.columbia.edu/content/rules-university-conduct>.

foundation to work effectively in diverse environments with mutual respect, which was key for my later professional endeavors.

I have worked in international organizations for more than 25 years, where people from various nationalities, religions, and backgrounds have worked side-by-side to solve critical issues for the world. I am proud to have been part of the leadership teams of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Bank of England; and proud to have led the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and the London School of Economics. These experiences have shown me that education is the single most powerful tool to make our communities and our world better. And, amid these challenging times, I believe it is important for the Columbia community to realize the powerful impact of our core educational mission.

We have taken concrete action on this front. In December, we launched *Values in Action*, a set of initiatives to rededicate ourselves to fostering dialogue and civil debate, especially among those with differing opinions and viewpoints, with mutual respect.

Our new Dialogue Across Difference (DxD) program is a key part of *Values in Action*. DxD has been holding programming, providing professional development opportunities for faculty hoping to facilitate difficult conversations in our community, and providing seed grants which will permit students, faculty, and staff hoping to create their own programs focused on facilitating dialogue across difference.

DxD has already hosted events focused on facilitating effective and respectful dialogues amongst those with differing opinions. The events have covered a diverse range of topics, including a discussion detailing the history of Middle East conflicts and the chances for peace in the region, a conversation about divisions in our democracy, and a discussion on artificial intelligence and its effects on future public dialogues and freedom of speech. These events were wonderful learning experiences on a wide range of topics and demonstrations that those with differing opinions can have productive debates and discussions—even regarding high-stakes issues.

In addition to these community-wide events, the University is providing professional development and training opportunities for faculty through the DxD program. In January and February of this year, DxD trained Columbia faculty on “Having Difficult Conversations” and “Employing Empathetic Objectivity in the Classroom.” DxD also partnered with an organization outside the University to provide skills trainings to Columbia staff, aimed at responding to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, de-escalating situations that become too heated, and facilitating conversations despite difference.

Finally, the DxD program provides funding to support faculty and students who want to create their own partnerships and programming to support positive conversations across differences. This will allow individuals throughout our community to play an active role in building productive bridges across difference and promote more beneficial conversations and collaboration. Although this program is still young, we are pleased with the incredible progress that has been made, and we look forward to continued growth and collaboration fostered by DxD in the coming months and years.

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It is an unfortunate reality that antisemitism has existed for about 2,000 years. It is an ancient, but terribly resilient, form of hatred. One would hope that by the twenty-first century, antisemitism would have been relegated to the dustbin of history, but it has not. The antisemitism that Jewish people have experienced on campuses and in cities across our nation, including our own, in the past few months is both real and dangerous. To confront this challenge, I believe we can look to periods in our history where antisemitism has been in abeyance. Those periods were characterized by enlightened leadership, inclusive cultures, and clarity about rights and obligations. These are the values I have learned throughout my professional career, and values I am committed to fostering at Columbia. I know together we will emerge as a stronger and more cohesive community.

Thank you for the opportunity to address these critically important issues. I look forward to your comments and questions.