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Seattle University Faculty & Staff

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Faculty and Staff Call for Moral Leadership and Large-Scale Educational Initiative in Response to Israel-Hamas War

Seattle U Faculty and Staff

Seattle University prides itself as a progressive Catholic voice on many consequential issues within society. As we watch atrocities continue to unfold in the Middle East, Seattle University has not lived up to its mission of empowering leaders for a just and humane world.

We mourn the 1,200 Israeli lives brutally taken by Hamas on October 7, and 16,000 (and counting) Palestinian deaths caused by Israel since then. We want the hostages released immediately and seek an immediate and permanent ceasefire. We also want the U.S. and our political leaders to end their support of Israel's ongoing military actions against the Palestinian people, and their support for apartheid in the Palestinian territories.

We call on colleagues and allies to reject anti-Arab, anti-Palestinian, Islamophobic, and antisemitic vitriol. We know that a government does not always speak for its people. Neither Donald Trump nor Joe Biden represents all Americans, Benjamin Netanyahu does not represent all Israelis, and Hamas does not represent all Palestinians. No form of hatred or bigotry has any place in any social justice movement, and it must be rejected here in our own country and on our campus.

We are proud of SU students working to educate their peers about the entwined histories of Palestine and Israel through awareness-raising activities. These efforts have been peaceful and student leaders have made it clear there is no room for hate speech at SU. In the absence of an appropriate response from the Administration, these student-led efforts have served as a moral compass for our campus.

Despite their best efforts, student-led campaigns have not been immune to larger societal forces. We recognize the people responding to the crises in Israel and Gaza on campus are primarily undergraduates. As such, they must be given the space to make mistakes and to learn from them. As educators, we must also teach our students how to apologize for mistakes and how to accept apologies.

We must also allow for the open exchange of ideas in a respectful, hospitable environment free from censorship. We are specifically disturbed by actions by James Willette, Associate Provost and Dean of Students, to stifle student activism. Dean Willette told students they could not have representatives from Jewish Voice for Peace, Resist US-Led War, and SUPER-UW speak at a rally on November 7 organized by Palestinian and Arab students and their allies: "As you know, the ongoing conflict in Israel and Palestine is a highly charged issue, and we have seen demonstrations on other college campuses result in disruption and violence. Because including outside individuals/groups poses a risk of substantial disruption and safety concerns, this message is to notify you that although your demonstration has been tentatively approved (pending approval of the requested space), you are prohibited from inviting outside individuals/groups to participate." Dean Willette did not provide evidence of violence caused by these groups, nor is

there a history of violence at SU related to Israel/Palestine. Rather, it seems the Administration prevented speech specifically because of the topic. That an issue is “highly charged” does not justify the administration’s silencing of students’ free speech. If controversy is a reason to curtail free speech, then all protest is vulnerable to censure. We have observed a pattern from Seattle University Administration of stifling student protests, ever since the 2016 Matteo Ricci protests.

We want the Administration to “empower leaders for a just and humane world.” But how can we claim to empower the next generation of social justice leaders when we stifle their activism? Therefore, we call on the Administration to form a committee of students, faculty, and administrators to rewrite university policies around student protest.

Taking a multi-layered, multi-disciplinary approach shows the escalation of violence in Israel/Palestine is deeply connected to questions of law, power, racism, indigeneity and decoloniality. SU has the resources to thoughtfully engage in the difficult conversations on Israel/Palestine. Campus experts such as the LCIJ, ICTC, ODI, IPI, and MOSAIC, can contribute to educating our students on these issues while fostering dialogue and avoiding polarization. Dartmouth College has successfully taken this approach, allowing multiple departments and units to collectively create learning opportunities for community members.

It is time to foreground the central mission of Seattle University’s Mission: to teach. As an institution of higher education, our students—future justice-focused leaders—should learn about difficult topics. We demand the following:

1. A task force of experts—including those at Seattle University knowledgeable on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice, Conflict and Peace—to lead the institution on

navigating crises, including Israel/Palestine.

2. Additional University sponsored teach-in opportunities for faculty and staff to meet the needs of our diverse student body. The “Confronting Conflict” series supported by the

College of Arts and Sciences is a good start.

3. Shared readings for the class of 2027 be written by authors from Palestine and Israel.

4. Additional faculty leadership (i.e., tenure lines) housed in the College of Arts and Sciences (e.g., Political Science, International Studies) on contemporary issues in the Middle East.

5. The formation of a committee of faculty, students, and administrators to rewrite university policies around student protest.

6. Providing culturally sensitive counseling for students from affected identities. An Israel/Palestine forum would allow students to discuss how the crisis is affecting them.

Our hope is that after some discernment and soul searching, the Administration supports our demands for multiple educational opportunities for the campus community. If the Administration wishes to break through social-media influenced siloed positions—a point raised by President Peñalver—they should engage, not deflect, on Israel/Palestine.

Sincerely,

Dr. Onur Bakiner, Associate Professor, Political Science

Ms. Shelley Carr, Librarian, Assistant Professor, Lemieux Library

Dr. Natalie Cisneros, Associate Professor, Philosophy and Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies

Dr. Joseph Nicholas DeFilippis, Associate Professor, Social Work

Dr. Eva Dicker, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology

Dr. Fade R. Eadeh, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology

Dr. Hye-Kyung Kang, Professor, Social Work

Dr. Kate Koppelman, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of English

Dr. Beatrice Lawrence, Associate Professor, Theology and Religious Studies

Dr. Rachel E. Luft, Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology and Sociology

Dr. Nova Robinson, Associate Professor, History, International Studies, and Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies

Dr. Maria Tedesco, Associate Teaching Professor, MRI

Faculty/Staff: To co-sign this letter, click here: <https://forms.office.com/r/wqgLcFVxLJ>

To see the full list of signatories, click here: <https://shorturl.at/gwY56>