

June 4, 2024

Dear Mr. Gribbons and Dr. Mazerolle,

As employees of the University of New Brunswick, we are dismayed by the content and tone of the [President's May 31, 2024 statement](#) on Gaza protests on campus and to our calls for action. We have witnessed several universities across North America constructively engage those members of their communities demanding a more substantial response to the genocide. It is our hope that UNB's administration emulate this path and open up a genuine dialogue at this foreboding moment in history – for we strongly believe that neutrality in the face of genocide is tantamount to complicity.

To respond to the President's statement, first and most concerning is the insinuation that members of the UNB community protesting against genocide have engaged in violence. Peaceful expressions of dissent, be they wearing Keffiyehs at graduation, carrying protest signs, or issuing letters of concern, are not violent according to any intelligible definition of the term. In fact, the only possible action that could be construed as violent in the recent campus events is the act of ordering uniformed and plain clothes security personnel to intervene against members of the university community engaged in entirely peaceful protest.

To invoke concern about “safety” and “violence” is to produce a criminalizing discourse which delegitimizes the demands of protesters, shuts down discussion, and consequently justifies enforcement. This is contrary to the core mission of the university as a site of free and open expression, inquiry, and debate.

But violence *is* at the core of the issue here: the relentless violence by the state of Israel against the civilian populations in Gaza and the Occupied West Bank. The institutional investment of UNB in that project, whether through knowledge exchange or financial investment of the endowment, no matter how small, is an expression of violence by a university at this moment.

Second, the claim to political and institutional neutrality is clearly selective given the university's unequivocal statements of support for Ukraine. It is worth reminding the President what he wrote to the university community on March 9 2022: *“I write today expressing deep concern over the escalating situation in Ukraine. Over the past two weeks, the world has watched with disbelief and horror as events unfold in Europe.*

We stand with many universities in Canada and around the world in offering our care and thoughts for those in Ukraine, and those here at home, impacted by this devastation. These attacks have resulted in the displacement of millions of refugees from their country, their homes, and their families.”

The double standard when it comes to Gaza is deeply concerning.

Presidents, board chairs, or other senior administrators cannot absolutely determine where a university stands on issues of global concern, least of all a widely documented genocide. These

positions are relatively transient management and governance roles. In contrast, universities are defined much more by their students, staff, faculty and alumni; their voices carry far greater scholarly and moral weight. Presidents of course have “the freedom not to comment” in a personal capacity, but to be leaders with moral authority, they must have faculty and students with them. UNB must be no exception to this obvious principle.

Thirdly, we agree that “as a university we must remain focused on our core functions – teaching, research, engagement and service.” To protest a genocide is not a distraction from this focus, but in fact its realization: it is precisely as a function of our work as members of the university community in research, teaching, engagement, and service that we cannot silently tolerate genocide and attempts to suppress dissent in the face of that horror. The strategic plan [Toward 2030](#) calls for us to “Engage globally to translate research knowledge for community well-being.” This is what our work has always meant; what it *is for*.

Lastly, we note a startling omission in the recent statement: the question of reconciliation and decolonization that are moral imperatives for every institution of higher education in this country. Part of any acknowledgement of the colonial heritage of this university and its continued existence on unceded land is at least the implicit pact not to reproduce those dynamics in the present. It is simply impossible if one proceeds with any moral or intellectual rigor not to acknowledge the colonial dynamics and power asymmetry that are at the root of the devastating violence in Gaza. Our commitment to decolonization *must* be a commitment to oppose colonial violence *everywhere* and certainly never to derive material benefit from complicity.

A university on Turtle Island cannot assume a position of political neutrality when it is produced by and produces these systems of colonial violence, which include investments in Israel and its apartheid and genocidal state operations. Student protests from the 1960s and 70s onwards have shaped the university as an institutional structure—they are the reason we have academic units in gender and sexuality studies, Black studies, Indigenous studies, etc.—and have generated a necessary moral compass.¹ This history helps us understand what critique really enables: a more just and diverse production of knowledge, a principle that we are seeing undermined now by institutional attempts to stifle or ignore student protests.

In summary, we reject the President’s negative framing of those standing in solidarity with Palestinians. We reject his appeal to “political neutrality” and “institutional autonomy,” because these are not an appropriate response to colonial violence done with our institution’s moral and material support. As such, we firmly reiterate the calls to action outlined in our original letter:

- 1) A statement condemning Israel’s current military campaign and the ongoing colonial occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people.

¹ See: Roderick A. Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things: The University and its Pedagogies of Minority Difference* (U of Minnesota Press, 2012) and Frances Henry et. al.’s *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities* (UBC Press, 2017).

- 2) A commitment to no longer criminalizing and treating with suspicion students and members of the university who raise voices in solidarity with and as Palestinians.
- 3) A refusal to be complicit in this genocide and the apartheid state by divesting from all investments in Israeli companies, all companies that do business with Israel, and all weapons manufacturers and other businesses whose products are being used in Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people.
- 4) Cease all academic contacts with Israeli higher education institutions upon Occupied Palestinian Territories or those supporting the apartheid state.

Signed,

1. W. Thom Workman, Professor, Department of Political Science
2. Viqar Husain, Professor, Department of Mathematics and Statistics
3. Matthew A. Sears, Professor of Classics, Department of Historical Studies
4. Tia Dafnos, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology
5. Anna Hamling, Professor, Department of Culture and Media Studies
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11. Patricia Morris, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing
12. Martha Paynter, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Nursing
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18. Tracy Glynn, Part-time Instructor, Department of Sociology
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81. Julie Morris, Collections Analysis/Bibliometrics Librarian, UNB Libraries

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Employees of UNB can sign on here: <https://forms.gle/jjWjp6K3ofvXJ1cw7>