

An Open Letter from Faculty to the Vanderbilt Administration
regarding the Vanderbilt Student Government referendum
proposed by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition

Dear Chancellor Diermeier:

We, the undersigned faculty, are deeply troubled by the Vanderbilt administration's decision to suppress a referendum for the adoption of a Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) amendment to Vanderbilt Student Government's constitution. The proposed amendment, initiated by the Vanderbilt Divest Coalition and supported by over 1,000 Vanderbilt students, would bar the use of student government funds on a [list of corporations](#) connected to Israeli human rights violations. We write to affirm the right of students to participate in the BDS movement, to advocate for Palestinian rights on campus, and to engage in student governance free of administration interference.

Vanderbilt University has publicly proclaimed its commitment to democratic institutions, through the establishment of Vanderbilt's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions and the creation of the Vanderbilt Project on Unity and American Democracy. We find it ironic and disgraceful for Vanderbilt to describe itself as a beacon of democratic activity while, at the same time, prohibiting the most direct forms of democratic action that students can take.

According to a letter from Vanderbilt Student Government, the university's Office of General Counsel urged the blocking of the proposed BDS referendum. [Legal consultants](#) have confirmed that a BDS amendment to the VSG constitution would not violate any Tennessee or federal laws. Moreover, [three federal courts](#) have held laws barring boycotts to be unconstitutional. We are gravely concerned that Vanderbilt's removal of the referendum from the ballot uses legality as a facade to quash student activism for Palestinian liberation.

Sadly, this would not be the first time that Vanderbilt has stood in the way of student calls for justice. In 1960, the university [expelled](#) civil rights activist James Lawson for his role in organizing Nashville's famous lunch-counter sit-ins. In February 1978, Vanderbilt [crossed](#) the apartheid South Africa cultural boycott picket line, despite significant outcry. In addition to being an early investor in for-profit prison corporation CoreCivic (formerly, Corrections Corporation of America), the university actively [collaborated](#) on research projects with the company, which [settled](#) a forced labor lawsuit in 2023. The expulsion of Lawson cast a long shadow on Vanderbilt's reputation, only partly repaired by his eventual hiring and the establishment of the James Lawson Institute. Vanderbilt's inaction on apartheid South Africa was remembered by students decades later who demanded the university sever its ties with a corporation involved in land grabbing in Africa.

Vanderbilt students have long spoken out on critical issues of moral concern, locally and globally. Their political speech, protest, and collective action should be encouraged rather than discouraged. This is especially true when, as in Palestine today, oppression and

violence are contributing to the suffering of millions of people and the loss of tens of thousands of human lives.

The recent decision to remove the BDS referendum from the upcoming VSG ballot is a step in the wrong direction. We condemn this suppression of student democracy and demand that the ballot referendum be reinstated.

Sincerely,

Anthony Reed, Professor of English
Laurel Schneider, Professor of Religious Studies
James Bodfish, Professor of Hearing & Speech Sciences
Jonathan Gilligan, Professor of Earth & Environmental Sciences
Carwil Bjork-James, Associate Professor of Anthropology and Law
Candice Amich, Associate Professor of English
Samira Sheikh, Associate Professor of History
Jessie Hock, Associate Professor of English
Anand V Taneja, Associate Professor of Religious Studies
Christin Essin, Associate Professor of Theatre
Catherine Molineux, Associate Professor of History
Shoshana Adler, Assistant Professor of English
Andres Pinedo, Assistant Professor of Human and Organizational Development
Mabel Denzin Gergan, Assistant Professor of Asian Studies
Carmine Grimaldi, Assistant Professor of Cinema and Media Arts
Alex Dubilet, Assistant Professor of English
Hilario Lomeli, Mellon Assistant Professor of Latinx Studies
Jihan Mohammed, Lecturer in Sociology
Jonathan Karp, Post-Doctoral Fellow in Culture, Advocacy, and Leadership

Brooke Ackerly, Professor of Political Science, Law, and Philosophy
Jennifer Fay, Professor, Cinema & Media Arts and English and German Studies
Carol Ziegler, Professor of Nursing, Head of Gilette House
Lesley Gill, Professor Emerita of Anthropology
Dominique Behague, Associate Professor of Medicine Health and Society
Kenneth MacLeish, Associate Professor of Medicine, Health & Society
Ben Tran, Associate Professor of Asian Studies and English
Brandon Byrd, Associate Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies and History
Karen Ng, Associate Professor of Philosophy
Rebecca Epstein-Levi, Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and Gender & Sexuality Studies
Julie Gamble, Assistant Professor of Gender and Sexuality Studies
Huan He, Assistant Professor of English
Vivian Shaw, Mellon Assistant Professor of Asian and Asian Diaspora Studies
Lara Lookabaugh, Post-Doctoral Fellow in Gender and Sexuality Studies
Helen Makhdoumian, Post-Doctoral Fellow in English
Ellen McMahon, MD, MPH, FAAP, Instructor in Pediatrics

and eleven faculty members who choose to remain anonymous.

If you are a Vanderbilt faculty member and wish to sign this letter, you may do so here:

<https://forms.gle/t4DqjsutfXVquAdn9>