



### [University Leaders Testify at Latest Congressional Hearing Regarding Free Speech on College Campuses](#)

A hearing took place this week in the U.S. House Education and Workforce Committee, which saw university leaders from the three schools of Georgetown University, the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), and the City University of New York (CUNY) provide testimony and address questions posed by House lawmakers regarding free speech on college campuses. During their remarks, the university administrators touted their respective institutions' efforts to safeguard free speech protections while at the same time ensuring the safety of students, strongly pushing back against accusations from several Republican lawmakers that not enough was done to combat antisemitism. The university officials emphasized that hateful rhetoric against Jews or any other groups was unacceptable. Activists have long lamented the wrong and dangerous attempt by some to conflate legitimate criticism of Israel with antisemitism, pointing out that it is inaccurate to label merely speaking out in support of social justice causes like Palestinian rights as somehow antisemitic. Thus, many observers have understandably highlighted that the grilling of university leaders by certain lawmakers demonstrates that these types of hearings are not sincere efforts to protect students, but instead aimed at silencing or deterring speech that sheds light on Israeli human rights violations and war crimes – something that has increasingly become a prevalent point of societal concern both on U.S. college campuses and elsewhere.

To this point, various Democratic lawmakers and others have argued that those engaging in what they deem to be performative political theater are harmfully weaponizing antisemitism as a means of attacking higher education institutions, due to these being one of the main settings where people are seeking to draw attention to contemporary injustices. The allegations of pervasive antisemitism are simply not true and have even been debunked by Jewish academia at many of these universities. In one such case, prior to Tuesday's hearing, a group of more than 80 Jewish faculty members at UC Berkeley expressed in a letter to the House committee that they rejected the claim that the university has an "antisemitic environment." They voiced that they felt secure on campus and supported the university administration's efforts to balance safety with respect for free speech. Furthermore, Congressmembers berating university leaders at these hearings have been criticized by their colleagues for ignoring other forms of bigotry on college campuses. As ranking member of the House Education and Workforce Committee Bobby Scott (D-VA) was quick to outline, "I'd be remiss if I did not point out that this is our ninth hearing on antisemitism in 18 months [and that in that time] we have not held a single hearing addressing racism, xenophobia, sexism, Islamophobia or other challenges affecting other student groups on American college campuses." For many, this shows that these hearings are being used to try and curb what is becoming more widespread free speech that is critical of Israel under the guise of "stamping out antisemitism."

During the latest hearing, university leaders stressed the importance of protecting free speech on campuses for both students and faculty, while outlining that disciplinary action had been taken in situations that warranted it. They also alluded to the crucial role that facilitating an environment for productive dialogue and civil discourse regarding pressing contemporary issues has in the overall environment of a university, as well as the benefit of exposing students to varying viewpoints. Regrettably, some committee members like U.S. Representative Elise Stefanik (R-NY) made outlandish remarks such as calling for a CUNY law professor to be disciplined for serving as a lawyer to recently vindicated student activist Mahmoud Khalil and also attacking the university for hiring a former employee of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) with Stefanik appallingly suggesting that the civil

rights organization was “terrorist-affiliated.” However, despite attempts like this to turn the proceedings into a combative and showy spectacle, analysts largely concluded that university leaders avoided some of the major stumbles that tripped up their peers at earlier hearings.

With hearings such as the most recent one this week, it is clear to human rights and social justice activists that some lawmakers are repeatedly seeking to use the longstanding harmful tactic of conflating legitimate criticism of Israeli policies and actions with antisemitism. This form of censorship and method to try and suppress free speech related to the issue has become apparent, particularly as valid denunciation of Israel has grown in pervasiveness. It is also troubling because it disregards the diverse array of individuals who are speaking out in support of societal concerns like this, which includes many Jewish Americans themselves, in addition to citizens from various ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The overwhelming majority of those taking part in college campus solidarity movements have done so in a peaceful and civil manner, and as such, smearing these as somehow fostering a hateful or bigoted environment is wrong. All of this is made even more problematic when considering that campuses in the United States have historically been centerpieces of shaping and evolving public discourse on key contemporary societal issues, and therefore, any efforts to clamp down on organic outrage over injustice should be alarming to anyone who values the freedom of speech protections that we are entitled to as Americans.