

November 28, 2023

Ann Kirschner, Interim President, Hunter College
Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of the City University of New York

Dear Interim President Kirshner and Chancellor Matos Rodríguez:

I am writing on behalf of the Professional Staff Congress Academic Freedom Committee. Our charge is to defend academic freedom as a professional and contractual right of all CUNY professional staff. Academic freedom is grounded in the faculty or staff member's qualifications for the position as reviewed by his/her peers. It consists of the freedom to teach, research, write, and to speak in our capacity as citizens without restraint by the administration.

We note with great alarm two situations at Hunter College: one involves actions taken by management that are in clear violation of the principles of academic freedom and free expression; the other, equally alarming, involves a failure to act in the face of attacks by outside groups against Hunter College faculty and staff that are clearly intended to deter them from being able to exercise their rights to academic freedom and free expression. Taken together, they constitute what we see as an attempt by management to chill academic freedom and free expression.

The first instance was the cancellation, apparently at the direction of Interim President Kirschner, of a screening of the film *Israelism*. The screening was organized and sponsored by two academic units at the college: the Department of Film and Media Studies and the Arabic Program. The administration had been informed of the screening, scheduled for November 14, well in advance. As the screening date approached, and in light of the terrible events of October 7 and what followed those events, the Department of Film and Media Studies was approached by Hunter College administrators with various sets of demands. The first demand was that Professor Tami Gold, who was going to host the November 14 event, would not refer to the events of October 7 in her introduction. She agreed to this request. Subsequently, the Department was asked to limit attendance to Hunter College ID holders only, even though well over a hundred people had already RSVPed to attend the film. The Department agreed to this request. On the morning of November 14, the Department was informed that the film screening was being cancelled at the direction of Interim President Kirschner, who later that day released this [statement](#), and that it could be rescheduled for a later yet unspecified date.

This decision was immediately challenged by the Executive Council of the Hunter College Chapter of PSC-CUNY. On November 15, Hunter College Chapter Chair Jennifer Gaboury introduced a resolution to the Hunter College Senate objecting to the cancellation of the screening; an amendment was then added demanding that the screening be allowed to occur in November. The resolution passed by a vote of 32 to 7, with 16 senators abstaining. It is our understanding that some of the organizers of the event have since met with Interim President Kirschner, who has agreed to allow the film to be screened "within the next two weeks," though as of this writing we are not aware of an exact date having been set.

It should go without saying that the arbitrary cancellation of a faculty-organized event by Hunter College management is a clear and blatant violation of the principles of academic freedom and free expression and an infringement upon the contractual rights of our members. The film in question has won numerous awards, including an Audience Award at the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, and has been widely screened at colleges and universities. We reiterate the demand from our colleagues at Hunter College that the screening be allowed to go forward without further delay and that the college administration reform its approach to free expression on campus.

At the same time as Hunter College management was acting to cancel an academic event organized by faculty members in the name of “ensur[ing] the safety of our learning community,” to quote from Interim President Kirschner’s statement, it has utterly failed in its responsibility to protect the safety and professional rights of faculty and staff from outside attacks. During the week of November 13-17, 2023, a truck operated by an outside special interest group, “Accuracy in Media” (henceforth “AIM”), circled the main campus of Hunter College (as well as the CUNY Law School campus) with a rotating display of photographs and names of 25 Hunter faculty and staff members. Their images were projected onto a large, triple-sided digital screen under the caption, “CUNY’s Leading Antisemites.” The faculty and staff whose images are being displayed by AIM have apparently been identified for targeting because they signed a letter titled “[We Reject the Palestine Exception to Free Speech at CUNY.](#)” a statement intended to be a defense of freedom of expression and assembly at CUNY.

As part of this public “doxxing” campaign, AIM also has also purchased internet domains using the first and last names of the faculty and staff being attacked to create malicious websites that display their photographs, full names, and false and ungrounded accusations. The URL for each website was prominently displayed next to each faculty and staff member’s name and picture. These AIM-created websites use both a CUNY logo without the shaded square and an alternative version of a Hunter College logo, which are clear examples of trademark infringement. These websites are [intended to create reputational harm](#) for the individual faculty, staff, and students who have been targeted, and to cause reputational damage to Hunter College and to CUNY.

Yet in spite of these egregious attacks, neither Hunter College management nor the CUNY central administration have made any statement nor taken any action—either publicly or privately—to either condemn these attacks or to express support for faculty, staff, or students subjected to this targeted harassment. This lack of response from Hunter College and CUNY administration contrasts unfavorably with that of other universities whose faculty, staff, and students have been similarly targeted. AIM has used similar tactics, including “doxxing” trucks, on a variety of college campuses this fall. Most if not all of these visits have been followed by immediate denunciations and actions by those colleges’ administrations, including those of [Harvard](#), [Columbia](#), and [Yale](#). Harvard set up a [task force to aid doxxed and harassed students](#), while Columbia set up a [doxxing resource group](#) and “retained experts in the field of digital threat investigation and privacy scrubbing to support...impacted community members.” Harvard College’s Dean Rekesh Khurana called attacks against students “[deplorable and despicable](#)” in a statement to the *Harvard Crimson*. Yale also [issued a statement on the doxxing trucks](#).

By contract, no member of CUNY management has said they intend to protect employees or students nor issued a single word of denunciation about this affront to academic freedom and intellectual integrity, which also represents a very serious potential threat to the personal safety of those who have been targeted. At the time of the writing, Hunter and CUNY administrations have remained disturbingly silent about these attacks. This lack of response from CUNY management is particularly astonishing since the AIM harassment also constitutes an attack on the *institution's* reputation and integrity, as well as its intellectual property.

On November 22, faculty and staff who have been the victims of these attacks at Hunter College sent a letter to Hunter and CUNY administrators asking for, among other things, the administration to denounce the attacks and to better support its faculty, staff, and students. It is our understanding that a number of department chairs and program heads at Hunter College have also sent letters demanding action to Hunter management. Several of the 25 faculty and staff members targeted by AIM have reported being chased around campus and provoked in order to get cell phone videos of them reacting, a [well-known strategy of AIM](#). Others have received harassing emails and social media posts.

Taken together, the actions taken by Hunter College management to cancel an academic event and the inaction of Hunter and CUNY management in the face of attacks by an outside organization upon faculty and staff at Hunter have indisputably chilled free expression and academic freedom at Hunter and throughout the CUNY system. We echo the words of PSC-CUNY President James Davis in a [recent statement](#) on freedom of speech and assembly at CUNY: “Our hearts are with all of our colleagues and students who are experiencing distress. As PSC said in our October 2016 Resolution on Freedom of Speech and Assembly at CUNY, ‘There is no place on a university campus for any form of bigotry or systematic oppression including anti-Semitism or Islamophobia.’ [...] Students, faculty, and staff have a right, indeed an obligation, to speak up on issues about which they feel strongly.” And we remind you of the principle put forth by the American Association of University Professors: “Free speech is not simply an aspect of the educational enterprise to be weighed against other desirable ends. It is the very precondition of the academic enterprise itself.”

Therefore, in addition to calling upon the Hunter administration to work with the organizers of the canceled film screening to reschedule this event as soon as possible, we also call upon Hunter College management and the Chancellor's office to respond to the demands already made by faculty and staff under attack at Hunter. We reiterate those demands here:

1. Issue a formal statement condemning and opposing AIM's actions against Hunter College and other CUNY faculty, staff, and students;
2. Work with relevant authorities to prevent AIM's “doxxing” truck from continuing to circle Hunter College or any other CUNY campus;
3. Ensure that each faculty and staff member targeted by AIM is not at risk of disciplinary or negative employment action, or breaches to personal privacy and safety, on account of AIM's defamatory display;
4. Direct the CUNY Office of Legal Affairs to pursue legal means to remove websites with faculty names and likenesses from the Internet and to prevent AIM from any and all further online harassment;

5. Hire an online reputation service to scrub all mentions of these defamatory messages;
6. Direct the CUNY Office of Legal Affairs to take action against AIM for using the CUNY and Hunter College logos without authorization.

We await your timely response and I am ready to provide further information or answer any questions you might have. On behalf of the committee, I look forward to your immediate attention to these important matters.

Sincerely,

Anthony Alessandrini, Chair

On behalf of the Professional Staff Congress Academic Freedom Committee

CC: PSC-CUNY Principal Officers and Executive Committee

Professor Jennifer Gaboury, Chair, Hunter College PSC-CUNY Chapter

Professor Douglas Medina, Chair, University Faculty Senate Academic Freedom Committee