

May 31, 2022

To: Dr. Karol V. Mason, President, John Jay College
Dr. Brian Kerr, Vice President for Enrollment Management & Student Affairs, John Jay College

CC: Andrew Berezhansky, Student Council President, John Jay College
Professor Corinna Mullin, Faculty Advisor to John Jay Students for Justice in Palestine
PSC-CUNY Principal Officers and Executive Committee
Professor Douglas Medina, Chair, University Faculty Senate Academic Freedom Committee

Dear President Mason and Vice President Kerr:

It has come to our attention that a conference organized by students and faculty at John Jay College was effectively canceled by the John Jay administration a few days before it was scheduled to be held (on May 14, 2022). According to [the statement](#) circulated by the John Jay Student Council and other student groups involved in organizing the event, the conference, “Palestine Lives 2022,” was intended to be “a day-long conference to educate on Palestinian culture and speak to the issues of colonialism, imperialism, and Palestinian liberation.” That statement continues, “In response, the John Jay administration abruptly canceled the event, claiming the students failed to meet all of the necessary requirements for planning an event on campus. However, the organizers of the conference have met all of the administrative deadlines and requirements, and John Jay is instead using procedure as a pretext for censorship and discrimination.”

To our knowledge, there has been no public statement from John Jay management regarding the cancellation of this event. As the PSC-CUNY Academic Freedom Committee, charged with upholding the principle that “the free exchange of ideas on campus is essential to good education,” we are deeply concerned about this cancellation, which seems to constitute a clear attempt at chilling political and intellectual expression on campus. The PSC has always been clear about the need to protect academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus in all its forms. This cancellation comes at a moment when universities are under pressure from conservative political forces eager to repress discussions of anti-racism, gender and transgender studies, settler colonialism, and—in particular—almost any discussions of Palestine-Israel. A recent resolution passed by the University Faculty Senate, “Defending Academic Freedom to Teach About Race and Gender Justice and Critical Race Theory,” calls on the CUNY administration to resist efforts from groups outside the university to repress such discussions and to reject attempts to influence the free exchange of ideas on campus. In the case of the “Palestine Lives 2022” conference, it appears that the administration at John Jay did precisely the opposite.

Therefore, we call upon the John Jay administration to

- 1) provide an immediate explanation for the cancellation of the “Palestine Lives 2022” conference, and to provide evidence that this event was not treated differently from other student- or faculty-organized campus events (i.e. that no additional requirements were imposed upon this event solely based upon its content);

- 2) if any procedural issues played a part in the cancellation of this event, to work with the student and faculty groups involved in organizing this conference to organize similar events in the near future, including a version of this event in the spring of 2023, if the groups involved intend to organize such a conference again;
- 3) reimburse the student and faculty organizers for any funds that they committed to the event at the time it was initially approved by the John Jay administration; and
- 4) ensure that the guidelines and procedures for student- and faculty-organized events are clear and transparent, and that they are applied equally to all events, with no special requirements or impediments placed upon events based on their political grounding.

If there are aspects of the situation that we have misunderstood, we would be happy to receive clarification; but absent any such explanation from the John Jay administration, we remain concerned about what we see as a violation of academic freedom and political expression on campus. We look forward to your timely response and actions to address and ameliorate this situation.

Sincerely,

Professor Anthony C. Alessandrini (Chair)
On behalf of the PSC-CUNY Academic Freedom Committee