

February 23, 2024

Jorge Silva-Puras, Interim Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Student Success, Lehman College

Richard Relkin, Assistant Vice President for Communications and Marketing, Lehman College

Bridget Barbera, Executive Counsel to the President and Labor Designee, Lehman College

Fernando Delgado, President, Lehman College

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor, City University of New York

Dear Provost Silva-Puras, Assistant Vice President Relkin, Executive Counsel Barbera, President Delgado, 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 write to protest in the strongest possible terms the cancellation of a panel, "Globalize the Intifada! Mapping Struggles for Palestine from the Streets to Our Classrooms," to have been presented at the conference "[Engagement, Equity, and Antiracism](#)" organized by the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Lehman College in collaboration with Hostos Community College. The panel in question was organized by graduate student instructors who are PSC members, in collaboration with a distinguished Graduate Center alumni. Our understanding is that, due to a pressure campaign from outside the university, the title of the panel was first changed, and the panel was subsequently canceled. Ultimately, due to the fallout from external right-wing pressure and CUNY management's response to it, the entire conference has had to be postponed until a yet-unspecified date in the fall.

Every aspect of the handling of this situation by management at Lehman College has been riddled with violations of academic freedom. To begin with, yielding to pressure to replace the word "intifada"—an Arabic word that translates as "shaking off" or "resistance"—was completely unacceptable. The fact that the word in question is deemed "controversial" in certain political circles does not mitigate this fact. We remind you of the principle reiterated 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." The pattern by which CUNY management caves to outside political pressure, at the expense of this principle and of its own educational mission, is a disturbing one that needs to be reversed immediately.

The [public statement](#) made via social media about the panel's cancellation furthered this violation of free expression by stating that the panel would somehow "cause harm or make students feel unsafe"—an accusation that is not based on any evidence that the administration has provided. Similarly, the claim that the panel represented a form of "protest" rather than academic content references a distinction that does not exist within the category of academic freedom. Mr. Relkin was quoted in the [New York Post](#), speaking on behalf of Lehman College in what we can only understand to be the college's official statement: "We support the conference organizer's decision to cancel the panel, since its polarizing title was not reflective of the theme of the conference and does not align with campus policy." However, a panel organized by CUNY instructional staff in their fields of expertise has no responsibility to "align" with management's positions, nor does it have any responsibility to please all audiences.

Given that the conference itself has now been postponed to the fall, we demand that the panel be reinstated in its original form, with the original set of speakers and the original title, if and when the conference occurs. We also suggest that a public apology from the Lehman College administration is in order, given the extent to which CUNY management has chosen to give credence to, and even amplify, attacks from individuals and groups outside CUNY against the PSC members who worked to organize this panel. In doing so, it put the faculty members organizing the conference in a completely untenable position. A robust defense by management of our contractual right to academic freedom and the reminder that free expression is at the heart of CUNY's academic endeavor is the only acceptable response to such outside pressure, whose only goal is to stifle any form of expression that does not align with a narrow set of right-wing political views.

We have included the Chancellor as an addressee of this letter, since this cancellation is part of a disturbing pattern. Together with the cancellation by CUNY management of a faculty-organized film screening at Hunter College in October and of a faculty-organized panel on Gaza at Baruch College in November, among many other instances of repression that have been amply [documented](#), we are deeply disturbed at the extent to which CUNY management has violated the contractual academic freedom of PSC members, and more generally, cast a chill on political expression throughout CUNY.

We remind you of the words of PSC-CUNY President James Davis in a [recent statement](#) on freedom of speech and assembly at CUNY: "Students, faculty, and staff have a right, indeed an obligation, to speak up on issues about which they feel strongly." The pattern of violating the contractual right to academic freedom of PSC members must end. For an institution that advertises itself as offering public education for the public good, we feel obliged to warn you of the risk of complicity in acting to curtail public discussion of potentially genocidal acts.

We await your timely response, including your assurance that the panel will be included as originally intended as part of the rescheduled conference, with the full support of Lehman College management. 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.

PLEASE ACKNOWLEDGE RECEIPT OF THIS COMMUNICATION VIA EMAIL.

Sincerely,

Anthony Alessandrini, Chair
On behalf of the Professional Staff Congress Academic Freedom Committee

CC: Jane Kehoe-Higgins, Director, Institute for Literacy Studies, Lehman College
Teresita Levy, Interim Dean, School of Arts and Humanities, Lehman College
PSC-CUNY Principal Officers and Executive Committee Members
Professor Douglas Medina, Chair, University Faculty Senate Academic Freedom Committee
Ari Paul, *Clarion* Editor