

March 23, 2026

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of the City University of New York
Interim Dean Natalie Gomez-Velez, CUNY School of Law

Dear Chancellor Matos Rodríguez and Interim Dean Gomez-Velez:

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 their peers. It consists of the freedom to teach, research, write, and to speak in our capacity as community members without restraint by the administration.

We write in support of the graduating class of 2026 at the CUNY School of Law, who have [demanded the reinstatement of a student speaker at CUNY Law's upcoming graduation](#). They have been joined in this demand by CUNY students, staff, faculty, and alumni, as well as their loved ones who will celebrate with them at their graduation. We are addressing this letter to you, Interim Dean Gomez-Velez and Chancellor Matos Rodríguez, because we are also concerned that CUNY Law's revocation of the student speaker may become part of a larger attempt to prevent students from speaking at commencement at other CUNY colleges.

Attempting to prevent students from speaking at their own graduation goes against every principle upon which CUNY was founded and in the name of which it continues. It is both cowardly and deeply perverse that an institution that prides itself on being the people's university and loudly proclaims its commitment to student-centered learning would take steps to try to silence students at what should be a celebration of their achievements. In doing so, you are undermining everything that CUNY is meant to stand for. As a committee set up to defend the academic freedom of PSC-CUNY members, we remind you that academic freedom cannot exist in a context where students are not free to express themselves.

CUNY Law, like most academic institutions, has maintained a tradition of having a student speaker at graduation since its founding in 1983. The 2024 decision by then-Dean Sudha Setty to "indefinitely revoke" the Commencement student speaker followed a vicious campaign of right-wing attacks against CUNY Law students Nerdeen Kiswani and Fatima Mohammed, who had been elected by their peers to speak at graduation in 2022 and 2023 respectively, and who used the opportunity to speak to issues of social justice, including their commitment to Palestinian liberation.

Rather than supporting the free expression rights of these accomplished commencement speakers, whose speeches exemplified CUNY Law's motto—"Law in the service of human needs"—and the school's rich tradition of social justice lawyering, CUNY management joined in the campaign to vilify them. This displayed a callous and cowardly disregard for our students' rights to political expression—not to mention a failure to consider their fundamental well-being in the wake of a vicious doxing campaign. It also deeply damaged CUNY's reputation. In the

case of Fatima Mohammed, the threats against her were so extreme that the New York Bar Association [issued a report](#) criticizing CUNY for failing to protect its students' free speech rights. After Dean Setty's decision to revoke the student speaker for the 2024 CUNY Law Commencement, guest speakers Deborah N. Archer, a civil rights lawyer and president of the ACLU, and Muhammad U. Faridi, a litigator and president of the New York City Bar Association, [withdrew](#) in protest.

Unfortunately, CUNY management's decision has set a precedent for [other institutions](#), who are similarly attempting to silence students from speaking at commencement. We are also deeply concerned about the possibility of it being applied throughout CUNY. This repression is very clearly linked to the Palestine exception and is just the latest example of university administrators bowing to pressure from the Trump Administration and other political forces, even when such capitulation actively damages their institutions. Moreover, it is foolish to think that students can be silenced at their own graduations. They have, and will, make themselves heard.

CUNY should be setting a precedent in standing up for the free expression of our students—not for repressing it. Therefore, we join our students and colleagues to demand the reinstatement of a student speaker at the 2026 CUNY Law graduation, and the maintenance of student speakers at commencements—who must be allowed to speak in their own words without censorship—throughout the CUNY system.

We look forward to your immediate and affirmative response.

Sincerely,

Professor Anthony Alessandrini, Chair

On behalf of the PSC-CUNY Academic Freedom Committee

CC: Professor James Davis, President, PSC-CUNY and PSC-CUNY Principal Officers
Professors Stuart Davis and Emily Schnee, on behalf of the PSC Executive Committee
Professors Beth Evans and Hollis Glaser, Co-Chairs, University Faculty Senate Academic Freedom Committee

Professor Frank Deale, on behalf of the CUNY Law Faculty

Professor Jonathan Cornick, on behalf of The CUNY Alliance to Defend Higher Education

Ari Paul, Editor of *Clarion*

Professor Todd Wolfson, President, American Association of University Professors