

April 20, 2026

Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, Chancellor of the City University of New York
Timothy G. Lynch, President, College of Staten Island
Natalie Gomez-Velez, Interim Dean, CUNY School of Law

Dear Chancellor Matos Rodríguez, President Lynch, 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 faculty, staff, students, and alumni of the College of Staten Island, who have [demanded the reinstatement](#) of a live student valedictorian speaker at this year's CSI Commencement. Our committee [sent a letter](#) on March 25 in support of a [similar demand](#) for the reinstatement of a student speaker at the CUNY School of Law commencement. The fact that students are being prevented from speaking at their commencements—either via requiring speakers to pre-record their remarks, or by eliminating student speakers altogether—at multiple CUNY campuses suggests a deeply disturbing pattern. In plain terms, such policies amount to blatant censorship and are a very clear violation of our students' right to free expression. As a committee dedicated to defending academic freedom at CUNY, we join our colleagues at CSI and the Law School in demanding the immediate reinstatement of live student speakers at commencement ceremonies at their colleges, and throughout the CUNY system.

In May 2025, President Lynch unilaterally decided to require the pre-recording of the valedictorian speaker's address, thus rejecting commencement tradition. This decision was not announced in advance; rather, at the commencement ceremony itself, a recorded speech by the student speaker was played while the student herself—who is Palestinian—stood on the podium. President Lynch has now declared his intention to continue this censorship for the 2026 commencement, noting in an email exchange with faculty that it will become “standard operating procedure.” This comes despite the recommendations of an ad hoc committee of CSI faculty, staff, and student leaders set up precisely to address the issue, who strongly recommended the reinstatement of live student speakers at commencement, concluding: “Strong and passionate student voices reflect the health of the institution. In our view, pre-recording student speeches makes the College look unnecessarily beleaguered and timid.” President Lynch's unilateral decision, which ignores this recommendation to restore live student commencement speakers, violates the rights of free speech and academic freedom, and casts a chilling effect on all students, faculty, and staff, not only at CSI but throughout CUNY.

[As we have noted previously](#), attempting to prevent students from speaking, live and in person, at their own graduation goes against every principle upon which CUNY was founded and in the

name of which it claims to continue. The idea that an institution that prides itself on being the people's university and loudly proclaims [its commitment to student-centered education](#) would take steps to try to silence students at what should be a celebration of their achievements is not just cowardly, but deeply perverse. At CSI, in addition to the refusal to allow live student speakers at commencement, we are also aware of a deeply repressive atmosphere created by a large police presence at graduation ceremonies in 2024 and 2025. Taken together, this repression of student speech and expression, at an event intended to honor our students, undermines everything that CUNY is meant to stand for. We add, as a committee set up to defend the academic freedom of PSC-CUNY members, that academic freedom for our members cannot exist in a context where students are not free to express themselves.

The precedent of having students pre-record an address so it can be played while they are present is not just chilling but deeply insulting. It suggests that students cannot be “trusted” to deliver their own speeches and is obviously an attempt to manage and control students’ expression. This is precisely the definition of censorship. President Lynch’s justification for this new “standard operating procedure”—the fact that a previous student speaker arrived late to commencement—is incredibly specious. Logistical convenience can never be an excuse for violating students’ Constitutional right to free expression. We find it shocking that we even need to make this point.

As long as graduation ceremonies have existed, they have been a forum for students and other invited speakers—artists, writers, scholars, political figures, activists, and others—to deliver speeches that address the important issues of our time. The very definition of “commencement” implies that it is a ceremony meant to mark a beginning for graduating students, launching them into their roles as members of the community and as citizens. Indeed, the College of Staten Island’s [General Educational Goals](#) include an emphasis on cultivating “Social Responsibility and Civic Engagement,” defined as “civic knowledge and engagement, both local and global; principled participation in activities of personal and public concern; [and] engagement with global issues, including the role of the United States in the world.” The fact that students—even those who have been elected valedictorian or salutatorian, a signal honor—are being denied the right to make their views regarding social responsibility and civic engagement known, live and in person and in their own words, at their own commencement ceremony directly contradicts CUNY’s mission as a public university whose [“strategic roadmap”](#) emphasizes the goal of “creating a student-centered, equity-driven university.”

Unfortunately, CUNY management has set a precedent for [other institutions](#), who are similarly attempting to silence students from speaking at their commencements. We are deeply concerned about the possibility of this policy being applied throughout CUNY. This repression is 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 setting the model for repressing it. Therefore, we join our students and colleagues to demand the reinstatement of a live valedictorian speaker at the 2026 CSI graduation and repeat our demand for the reinstatement of a student speaker at the 2026 CUNY Law graduation. We also call on the Chancellor to issue a statement supporting the maintenance of live (not pre-recorded) student speakers at commencements 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

Professor John Verzani, Chair, University Faculty Senate

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 Cope, Chair, College of Staten Island PSC-CUNY Chapter

Professors Cindy Wong and Ashley Dawson, on behalf of the College of Staten Island Academic Freedom Committee of the Faculty Senate

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