

The New Assault on Academic Freedom

Professors across the country are being targeted by the right in order to score political points.

During the wave of campus protests opposing the U.S.-backed war on Gaza and calling for divestment from Israel, students weren't the only demonstrators to face arrest—supportive faculty members were also caught up in the crackdown.

At Columbia University, where president Minouche Shafik [was pressed](#) to resign by members of Congress for being too lenient toward the protesters, the university's School of Public Health [censured](#) a South African faculty member from teaching about the health impacts of settler-colonialism. Shafik [has also placed](#) professors who have used terms like “settler colonialism” or “apartheid” in the context of Israel under investigation for alleged anti-Jewish discrimination, and removed professors from teaching assignments in response to complaints by rightwing students.

When Shafik [testified](#) before Congress in mid-April, she announced that Middle Eastern Studies professor Joseph Massad [had been removed](#) as chair of the university's Academic Review Committee following claims by Republicans that he had said Hamas's murder of Jews was “awesome, astonishing, astounding, and incredible”—even though he [never said](#) anything of the sort. She also failed to correct false claims by Republican committee members regarding Columbia Law Professor [Katherine Franke](#), stating that she and Massad were under investigation for discriminatory remarks.

As Irene Mulvey, national president of the American Association of University Professors, [told](#) *The New York Times*, “We are witnessing a new era of McCarthyism where a House committee is using college presidents and professors for political theater. President Shafik's public naming of professors under investigation to placate a hostile committee sets a dangerous precedent for academic freedom and has echoes of the cowardice often displayed during the McCarthy era.”

And Columbia isn't the only university where faculty feel their academic freedoms are being steadily revoked.

Indiana University faculty have [overwhelmingly endorsed](#) a vote of no confidence in their president, provost, and vice-provost for suspending a tenured political science professor for a full year from teaching or advising—without normal review—after he hosted a talk by an Israeli-American peace activist the university [tried to ban](#).

Jodi Dean, a tenured professor at Hobart & William Smith College and a noted political theorist, has been [suspended](#) from teaching duties as a result of writing a [blog post](#) supportive of the Hamas attack. Although there had been no complaints from students about their interactions with Dean, the college's president [claimed](#) that she had led students to feel “threatened in or outside of the classroom.” While her essay was widely condemned, even by pro-Palestinian faculty, there has been no such disciplinary action against professors who have defended the far greater violence against civilians by U.S.-backed Israeli forces.

At Texas Tech University, Jairo Fúnez-Flores, an assistant professor of curriculum studies and teacher education, had [criticized](#) U.S. policy towards Israel-Palestine on social media and was [suspended](#) after unsubstantiated claims of antisemitism appeared on a rightwing website. Similarly, at New York University, a popular adjunct who is critical of Israel was [suspended](#) due to complaints that were not revealed to him or the public. At University of Arizona College of Education, an assistant professor and community liaison were

[placed on leave](#) for leading a discussion about civilian casualties in Gaza. An adjunct professor in American cultural studies at Washington University was [“relieved of all job duties”](#) and “prohibited from being on any part of the University campus” after taking part in a pro-Palestinian demonstration campus in which he and other peaceful protesters were arrested.

Graduate student instructors and teaching assistants have been particularly vulnerable and, in several instances, have been [removed](#) for simply noting the humanitarian consequences of Israel’s war on Gaza.

Administrations have been interfering with curriculum as well. At Albany Law School, a professor was [ordered](#) to unpublish a law review article by a prominent U.S. legal scholar and a legal briefing issued by a respected U.S. civil rights organization related to Israel-Palestine.

Unfortunately, the Biden Administration, rather than fighting this crackdown on academic freedom, has been supporting it. The Department of Education has opened a [Title VI investigation](#) into the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill because a Black professor in the Department of Communication said in a class that “Israel and the United States do not give a shit about international law or war crimes.” Such criticism of U.S. policy, according to the Biden Administration, may constitute discrimination against Jews.

Biden also [launched](#) an investigation against a George Washington University psychology professor for alleged antisemitism for critical comments about Israel just days after an independent investigation found [no evidence](#) to support charges.

Faculty, however, are fighting back, particularly in defense of their students. At [Columbia](#), [Barnard](#), the [University of Texas](#), and elsewhere, there have been walkouts and work stoppages. Faculty senates have condemned administrations for their violations of academic freedom, issued [no confidence](#) resolutions against their administrations, and have provided support—such as food deliveries—for students in their encampments.

Scores of faculty members have also been arrested, risking their careers and even physical safety.

At Indiana University, four professors [were detained](#) trying to protect students engaged in peaceful protests in a recognized free speech zone on campus, and have since been banned from campus for one year. At Washington University, historian Steve Tamari was [brutally beaten](#) by police while supporting peaceful demonstrators and [was hospitalized](#) with multiple broken ribs and a broken hand. Even faculty observers who were not participating in the protests themselves have become targets, such as at Emory University, where Economics professor Caroline Frohlin was [body slammed](#) during her arrest and Noelle McAfee, chair of Emory’s philosophy department chair, [was also arrested](#). At Dartmouth, Annelise Orlick, the sixty-five-year-old head of the Jewish Studies program, was twice [pushed to the ground](#) while being arrested and initially banned from campus for six months, although that was later rescinded.

While U.S. faculty have long been outspoken on controversial issues, these attacks on academic freedom are the worst in nearly sixty years. While they are in part related to pressure from rightwing Zionist groups and donors, these actions can best be understood in light of the broader attack by the right against higher education as a whole.

Representative Elise Stefanik, Republican of New York, for example, has [refused](#) to condemn Donald Trump’s antisemitic comments and associations, and touted the Great Replacement Theory and other antisemitic tropes; she is now leading the charge against antiwar and pro-Palestinian faculty for alleged antisemitism. The attacks that led to the forced resignation of Harvard University president Claudine Gay were orchestrated not by Zionist groups, but by figures like conservative activist [Christopher Rufo](#), who was also behind the assault on critical race theory.

The crackdown is having an impact. A survey of Middle East Studies faculty [revealed](#) that “82 percent of all U.S.-based respondents, including almost all assistant professors (98 percent), said that they self-censor when they speak professionally about the Israeli-Palestinian issue.”

While the right may be taking advantage of concerns of antisemitism, this disturbing trend should not be seen in isolation. What’s happening on campuses may only be the beginning.