

To the UConn Community,

I'm writing to you about a dispute between students that took place in the Homer Babbidge Library at the end of February. Some of you may be aware of it through social media, or news outlets. For many others, this message is the first you're hearing of it. Either way, a number of people, including students, alumni, parents and others have contacted me because they were troubled by what took place. So was I.

On its face, the dispute revolved around fliers posted in and scattered around the library that were critical of me, the state of Israel, and an economic development mission to that nation that I participated in earlier this year, along with a delegation of Connecticut officials and business leaders. The fliers were numerous, and two students were taking some down and picking up others and throwing them away. (The library's policy does prohibit multiple postings). As this was going on, an argument regarding the fliers started between them and a group of students seated nearby. During the course of the argument, a student called one of the two students who had been throwing the fliers away a series of crude insults as well as calling her a "f_____g Zionist."

What we know of it is based on a short video posted on social media and subsequent statements from each of those involved. The students throwing the fliers away, one of whom is Muslim and one of whom is Jewish, noted that some of the insults directed at the Jewish student were antisemitic in nature, which is unacceptable in any context.

The incident was heated enough that the police were contacted. UConn Police investigated and issued their report this past week. It was determined that nothing criminal took place on either side. The Division of Student Affairs also investigated and concluded that nothing said or done by anyone involved violated the Student Code of Conduct, a determination that was finalized this past Friday. Both concluded that, whatever else they were, the words spoken and actions taken fell into the category of free speech. Regardless of content or message, the university cannot and does not sanction students for the things they say while exercising this right.

Yet, as we have all seen, it is entirely possible for words to be protected speech under the First Amendment but still deeply harmful and inconsistent with our community's values, which this was.

Needless to say, this dispute wasn't really about fliers in the library. That was what sparked it, but it was really about much deeper issues tied to the combustible combination of religion, cultural identity, politics, history, and the ongoing conflict in the Middle East – a conflict that plays out around the world, including here.

Tensions surrounding these issues have been elevated at the university recently. Everyone is free to express their opinions and "choose a side" to support one way or another in the larger conflict, but UConn – the university, the state agency, the public institution – is not and will not. In the face of this and related disputes on our campuses, I have heard from Muslim students who tell me they feel that UConn does not value them. I have heard from Jewish students who tell me they feel that UConn does not value them. Neither is true. We value all our students and want every member of our community – no matter their differences – to respect one another, to know they belong here and to feel safe on our campuses, in the spirit of true inclusion.

At every university, including ours, open, civil and honest debate is not only encouraged, it is essential. We want every student to approach issues from an intellectual perspective – gather information,

analyze it empirically, draw conclusions and make an argument. That is how issues are best explored on a university campus, not through insults and angry confrontations. One of the ways we explore the issues I discuss above is through the [Abrahamic Initiative](#) coordinated by Global Affairs, which we will be discussing more in the coming weeks.

For myself, I'm happy to meet with any student group to discuss the trip to Israel and related issues, as I did last week with Undergraduate Student Government. When I spoke with the students, I said that my mission is "students first" with three objectives: safety, respect, and inclusion for all.

I have asked the Vice President for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, the Vice President of Student Affairs, and the Provost to dive deeper into this issue and provide additional details regarding the event, steps we took and any that we missed, the broader issues involved, and for recommendations on engaging students in more dialogue. I also asked them to examine: a) the role of social media in promoting hate and creating a climate of fear and harassment aimed at the two students; b) the reaction of a student group and questions about due process within student organizations; c) engagement and dialogue with student media; and d) the relevance and jurisdiction of the Student Code of Conduct, including with respect to social media activity (of note, the Code does apply to both on- and off-campus conduct, including that which takes place via social media). None of us at UConn has the right to "shout down" some or exclude them from aspects of our community.

As to the root causes of incidents like this: for generations, governments and peoples have worked to find a lasting resolution to end the conflict in that troubled region and have been unable to do so. But it is not hopeless and there has, at times, been progress. This past Saturday was the anniversary of the [signing of a peace treaty between Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat at the White House, joined by President Carter](#).

The anniversary was a reminder that each of us who feels passionately about these issues has a role to play and a choice to make. My hope is that our whole community chooses dialogue, deeper understanding, compassion for each other, and peace and humanity. We are all privileged to be a part of UConn Nation, where we are committed to creating a safe, inclusive environment.

Sincerely,

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