



From the Desk of the Graduate Council Co-Presidents
Student-Centered Recommendations regarding University International Crises Response

December 07, 2023

Dear University of Chicago Community,

As Co-Presidents of the Graduate Council, over the course of the quarter, we know that many members of the University of Chicago have been directly impacted by the ongoing situation in Palestine and Israel, and many more are feeling the weight of human suffering. As we go into winter break, a time of reflection and recentering, we call on the University of Chicago to reflect on our recommendations and set a student-centered agenda for the new year by responding to student needs holistically, with urgency and compassion.

Our Council's mission is to nurture a sense of belonging for all students, regardless of their political opinions or identity. Since the beginning of the quarter, some of our Council members and students of all backgrounds have been experiencing deep mourning, grief, and other intense emotional and psychological states. It is also our mission to ensure our campus is a space for students to feel empowered to engage in full and free inquiry and expression. It has come to our attention that many students have experienced and are in fear of experiencing discrimination, harassment, and retaliation for their political opinions and identity.

Every day in the last six weeks, some students have been watching the news of people suffering the most graphic conditions and deaths. It is unconscionable for students to be expected to perform as usual as they witness ongoing violence and, even more unconscionable, for them to have to turn a blind eye so they may academically function as expected.

We are deeply dismayed at some incidents that we view as having a chilling effect on discourse at the University, including the November 9th arrest of 26 students and 2 professors charged with

trespassing, as well as personal accounts we have received from students who report being retaliated against by faculty, students, and staff because of their political opinions. These students do not feel safe reporting incidents through formal University channels such as BEST (Bias Education & Support Team)¹ out of fear of further retaliation and skepticism that anything will come out of it. We feel these actions signal limitations to freedom of expression and inquiry espoused by the university as a guiding institutional principle.

Moreover, the increase in identity-based and political hate crimes across the country and on campus has raised concerns about campus safety and the need for more work around more meaningful inclusion and recurring anti-bias training.

This is not the first time that our campus community has been impacted by domestic and global crises. Unfortunately, there will likely be more global crises that impact our campus community in the future. For the sake of preparedness, fairness, and neutrality, we offer the following recommendations – which should be announced and offered to all students – to address their needs during the current events in Israel-Palestine, with an eye toward setting protocols for future crises, and building trust and rapport within the University community:

1. **We urge the Academic Divisions and Professional Schools to establish clear academic guidelines and institutional accommodations for students impacted by international and domestic crises, to be uniformly integrated into all course syllabi, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels.** By integrating these accommodations into course syllabi across both graduate and undergraduate programs, the university takes a proactive stance in acknowledging and addressing the diverse needs of its student body during times of global and domestic crisis. This initiative promotes a more inclusive and empathetic academic environment, where students grappling with crises feel supported and understood in their educational journey. It also reflects the university's commitment to academic equity, ensuring that all students have fair access to educational resources and opportunities despite external adversities. Furthermore, such a standardized approach enhances the university's reputation as an institution that not only values academic excellence but also prioritizes the holistic well-being of its students. Additionally, until these institutional guidelines and accommodations are enacted, we urge faculty to make academic accommodations for their students and show leniency. Some examples include forgiving missed classes, excusing lateness, forgiving or finding alternatives for missed and/or small assignments, being lenient in grading, and giving extensions for remaining assignments. By fostering this inclusive and supportive culture, the University of Chicago strengthens its community bonds, enhances student retention and success, and upholds its standing as a leading institution that is responsive and adaptable to the evolving needs of its students.

¹ <https://csl.uchicago.edu/get-help/uchicago-help/bias-education-support-team-best/>

2. **We ask that Student Wellness extend its counseling services, offering dedicated hours for students affected by this and future crises, alongside a strategic plan for comprehensive and responsive support.** This would represent a significant step toward addressing the unique emotional and psychological needs of our student body. By offering these specialized support sessions, we acknowledge the distinct challenges faced by students in times of crisis. This initiative ensures that those affected have a safe, empathetic space to express their concerns, fears, and experiences without judgment. It also allows for tailored counseling approaches that are sensitive to the complexities of domestic and global crises, along with a focus on affinity-based and trauma-informed approaches. Furthermore, the development of a strategic plan for ongoing support not only provides immediate relief but also prepares us to proactively address similar situations in the future. Moreover, UChicago Wellness staff should be trained in crisis support to best respond to students with specialized resources. This approach underscores our commitment to the mental well-being of our students, ensuring they have the necessary resources to cope with stress, anxiety, and trauma in a supportive and understanding environment. Information on services and resources provided should be widely and intentionally circulated. By prioritizing mental health in this way, we aim to foster resilience, enable academic success, and enhance the overall well-being of our student community during challenging times.

3. **We call on administrators across campus to facilitate free and full expression and inquiry.** We strongly encourage the administration to adhere faithfully to its established guidelines, ensuring an unbiased and consistent approach across all campus activities and events. This commitment is crucial in nurturing an environment where robust and diverse conversations can thrive. By taking the initiative to host a wide array of voices and viewpoints, the administration can make programs more relevant to the crises and issues that students are currently grappling with. Moreover, it is essential to bridge the information gaps and break down the echo chambers that can limit our understanding and perspective. Facilitating events that address a variety of topics, including sensitive and complex issues like the crisis in Palestine-Israel and other crises in the future, is fundamental to achieving this goal.

4. **The University needs to take a firm stance against doxxing and other forms of digital harassment and take concrete measures to protect students, faculty and staff.** The digital extension of campus is just as active as our in-person campus. Sites such as Sidechat and channels such as Slack, are spaces exclusively for UChicago students and

ought to be considered digital extensions of campus. It is in these spaces that we have seen many cases of discrimination, harassment, and racism. In anonymous spaces, such as Sidechat, reporting such incidents doesn't allow for accountability. Moreover, specific students and staff have been surveilled by vigilantes and targeted through online harassment.² Doxxing often takes people out of context, and they often have little space to defend themselves. In addition to socially defaming and ostracizing people, doxxing can also blacklist people from jobs and other opportunities. Thus, the University ought to go beyond its typical harassment policy, send a clear message against doxxing and other retaliatory tactics, and actively take measures to protect and advocate for those affected.

5. **We call on the University to implement mandatory, regular sensitivity and unbiased training for faculty, with a focus on supporting students involved in contentious issues and promoting fair treatment of students with differing views.** Instituting mandatory sensitivity and unbiased training for faculty, with a focus on addressing students involved in contentious issues, as outlined in our third recommendation, will significantly enhance the academic and social environment at the University of Chicago. This initiative fosters a culture of understanding and respect, essential in a diverse academic setting. By equipping faculty with the tools and knowledge to navigate sensitive topics and diverse perspectives effectively, the university not only upholds its commitment to academic freedom but also ensures that this freedom is exercised responsibly and inclusively. Regular training keeps faculty abreast of best practices in bias prevention and sensitivity, crucial for maintaining a supportive and equitable learning environment. Moreover, this proactive approach to promoting non-biased and empathetic teaching methods directly contributes to a more harmonious campus climate. Additionally, this proactive approach is in contrast to the current reactive approach at the University that places the burden of reporting on students who may not feel safe enough to pursue accountability. It encourages constructive dialogue, reduces instances of misunderstanding and conflict, and ultimately enriches the learning experience for all students. By prioritizing such training, the University of Chicago demonstrates its dedication to excellence in education, not just in intellectual pursuits but also in fostering a community that values and respects every individual's unique experiences and viewpoints.

6. **We recommend a temporary University committee be formed to address the limitations and vulnerabilities of free inquiry and expression that recent events on campus have exposed.** As campuses across the nation have struggled with handling

² <https://news.uchicago.edu/media/statement/university-statement-gordon-center-posters>

activities around Israel and Palestine, the University of Chicago has generally stood by its principles of freedom of speech and inquiry. Nonetheless, recent developments have revealed areas that require further improvement. We urge the University to convene this committee to conduct an in-depth analysis of these issues, produce a comprehensive report, and formulate sustainable strategic recommendations to enhance our approach to these important matters.

In these times of heightened tensions, it's crucial that we don't let crises drive wedges within our community. Rather than allowing these tensions to create rifts among us, we must lean into our collective strength and embrace a spirit of understanding and empathy. This approach involves actively engaging in respectful, rigorous, and challenging dialogue, appreciating the diverse perspectives within our community, and collaboratively leveraging our varied skills and experiences. By shouldering challenges together and fostering a culture of inclusivity and mutual support, we reinforce the bonds that hold us together, ensuring that we emerge from these times not only intact but stronger and more united—even if we may disagree politically, ideologically, and intellectually.

The current crisis is an opportunity to develop services, protocols, procedures, and a culture that makes us, the University of Chicago, institutionally and communally resilient. This letter is a testament to our solidarity with students impacted by the crisis and a reaffirmation of our dedication to cultivating a nurturing environment. Our goal is to ensure that our academic community continues to be a symbol of empathy, resilience, and unwavering support for all those facing adversity. Through this collective effort, we aspire to create a future where every member of our community feels valued, understood, and empowered.

Warmly, with urgency, compassion, and hope,

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University of Chicago Graduate Council Co-Presidents

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Concerned Graduate Student, Divinity School, MDiv, 2024