



Student Government Assembly
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Date: October 7, 2019

To: United States Department of Education

Robert L. King (Assistant Secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education U.S. Department of Education)

Attn: Patrick Shaheen (U.S. Department of Education, Office of the General Counsel)

CC: Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle Eastern Studies

Charles Kurzman (Consortium Director)

Dr. Terry Magnuson (Vice-Chancellor for Research at the University of North Carolina)

Nicholas S. Economides (Chair of NYU Tenured/Tenure Track Faculty Senators Council)

Larry Slater (Chair of NYU Full-Time Continuing Contract Faculty Senators Council)

Ali Mirsepassi (Director of the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies)

Zachary Lockman (Chair of NYU Middle Eastern Islamic Studies Department)

Subject: Letter in Support of the Academic Freedom of Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle Eastern Studies

Dear United States Department of Education,

We are writing on behalf of New York University students and student groups who wish to voice opposition to the United States Department of Education's threats to pull Title VI funding from the Duke-UNC Consortium of Middle Eastern Studies (Duke-UNC CMES). These members of the NYU community have expressed a great deal of concern for these actions and their national implications.

On August 29, 2019, Robert L. King, Assistant Secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education sent a letter to Dr. Terry Magnuson, Vice-Chancellor for Research at the University of North Carolina, threatening to pull Title VI funding from the Duke-UNC CMES because he claimed the program did not meet the standards required for the funding¹. It is the opinion of the author and signatories of this letter that these threats are founded on baseless accusations, blatant Islamophobia, and that they set a dangerous precedent to the academic freedom of all institutions of higher education.

¹"Notice of a Letter Regarding the Duke-UNC Consortium for Middle East Studies." *Federal Register*, Federal Register, 17 Sept. 2019,

www.federalregister.gov/documents/2019/09/17/2019-20067/notice-of-a-letter-regarding-the-duke-unc-consortium-for-middle-east-studies

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 awards funding to educational institutions predicated on national security². Several departments all across the country, including the NYU Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies and the NYU Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, are the recipients of Title VI funding. These programs and departments generally utilize this funding in the same manner that the Duke-UNC CMES does. The criteria which validate receiving this type of funding are broad and up to interpretation³. The accusations on the part of Mr. King and how they relate to Title VI, that the Duke-UNC CMES has shown a lack of diversity in its programs, a lack of orientation towards national security, and a lack of professionalism in language programs, are all incorrect for a myriad of reasons and, in the way he is twisting the language of the statute, could be applied to every other recipient of this funding. Duke and UNC students and faculty as well as the Middle East Studies Association of North America have all pulled these accusations apart and highlighted the various reasons for which they are wrong⁴.

Many people within positions of power at the U.S. Department of Education today have a history of working to defund or shut down Middle Eastern studies departments across the nation and have used Islamophobic language as a means to achieve this goal⁵. It is no surprise, therefore, that the most inflammatory and unacceptable portion of these accusations is that the Duke-UNC CMES has a bias towards Islam. This is blatant Islamophobia and highlights the desire of the Department of Education to vilify Islam as they oppose any narrative that does not portray the religion negatively.

The U.S. Department of Education has built their threats upon a foundation of Islamophobia, xenophobia, and a refusal to support any beliefs that lie outside the standard national security narrative. It is therefore evident that they are weaponizing this funding in order to target the

²“Education and Title VI.” *Home*, US Department of Education (ED), 25 Sept. 2018, www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/hq43e4.html

³[1] “Civil Rights at School: Agency Enforcement of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.” *EveryCRSReport.com*, Congressional Research Service, 4 Apr. 2019, www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R45665.html

⁴Jadaliyya. “Duke Faculty Respond to Title VI Notice on UNC-Duke Middle Eastern Studies Program.” *Jadaliyya*, Jadaliyya, 4 Oct. 2019, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40059

Jadaliyya. “Student Response to Title VI Notice on UNC-Duke.” *Jadaliyya*, Jadaliyya, 27 Sept. 2019, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/40034/Student-Response-to-Title-VI-Notice-on-UNC-Duke

“18 Major Scholarly Societies Join MESA in Expressing Concern about the Department of Education's Interpretation of Title VI.” *Middle East Studies Association*, Middle East Studies Association, 4 Oct. 2019, www.mesana.org/advocacy/letters-from-the-board/2019/09/25/18-major-scholarly-societies-join-mesa-in-expressing-concern-about-the-department-of-educations-interpretation-of-title-vi

⁵ Campion, Angela. “Kenneth Marcus' Anti-Free Speech, Anti-Civil Rights Record.” *Palestine Legal*, Palestine Legal, 28 Nov. 2017, www.palestinelegal.org/news/2017/11/29/kenneth-marcus



Duke-UNC CMES in order to enforce, restrict, and control what is taught within the program and within the field of Middle Eastern Studies across the nation.

We propose that the U.S. Department of Education take the following actions:

1. **Drop the threat to pull funding from Duke-UNC CMES.**
 - a. Provide the Duke-UNC CMES with the standard funding it receives annually and allow the consortium to continue structuring their curricula as professors see fit.
2. **Stop working to restrict and control curriculums at institutions of higher education centered around regions, cultures, and religions because they do not align with the standard narrative of the U.S. government.**
 - a. In order to empower and encourage academic freedom within the United States, the continual targeting of regional, cultural, ethnic, and religious studies programs must come to an end.
 - b. The consistent historical and current targeting of Middle Eastern Studies programs, Islamic studies programs, and adjacent programs in an effort to either control them or shut them down needs to come to an end in order to maintain and progress academic freedom within institutions of higher education in the United States.

Fill out this form to sign onto this letter of support: <https://forms.gle/4GiYytxD12KSiG5W8>

Thank you,

John Jamil Kallas, Senator at-Large for Middle Eastern and North African Students.
jjk659@nyu.edu

Professors and faculty who have signed on:

Andrew Ross (Department of Social and Cultural Analysis)
Mary Nolan (Department of History)
Helga Tawil-Souri (Department of Media, Culture, and Communication)
Sinclair Thomson (Department of History)
James Uleman (Department of Psychology)
Rebecca E. Karl (Department of History)
Zachary Lockman (Department of Middle Eastern Islamic Studies)
Mohammed Rafi Arefin (Gallatin School of Individualized Study)
Sara Pursley (Department of Middle Eastern Islamic Studies)
Justin Streamns (Department of Arab Crossroads Studies)
Vasuki Nesiah (Gallatin School of Individualized Study)
Arjun Appadurai (Department of Media, Culture, and Communication)
Barnett R. Rubin (Center on International Cooperation)



Arang Keshavarzian (Department of Middle Eastern Islamic Studies)
Mark Crispin Miller (Department of Media, Culture, and Communication)
Lisa Duggan (Department of Social and Cultural Analysis)
Paula Chakravartty (Gallatin School of Individualized Study and Department of Media, Culture, and Communication)
Lauren Minsky (Department of History)
Adam Becker (Department of Classics & Religious Studies)
Elaine Freedgood (Department of English)
Barbara Weinstein (Department of History)
Sonya Posmentier (Department of English)
Arun Kundnani (Department of Media, Culture, and Communication)
Thomas Bender (Department of History)
John M. Archer (Department of English)
Lily Chumley (Department of Media, Culture, and Communication)
Amin Husain (Department of Social and Cultural Analysis)
Naila alAtrash (Department of Drama)
Nader Uthman (Department of Middle Eastern Islamic Studies)
Valerie Forman (Gallatin School of Individualized Study)
Monica Kim (Department of History)
Gianpaolo Baiocchi (Gallatin School of Individualized Study)
Stephen Duncombe (Gallatin School of Individualized Study)
Kathy Engel (Department of Art and Public Policy)
Gary Anderson (Educational Leadership)
Andrew H. Lee (Department of History and Department of Politics)
Kim Phillips-Fein (Gallatin School of Individualized Study)
Hartry Field (Department of Philosophy)
Diana Taylor (Tisch School of the Arts)
Sarah Steeley (NYU's Peace Corps Campus Recruiter)

Graduate Students who have signed on:

Isaac Hand
Alex Boodrookas
Mateo Nelson
Fatima Tariq
Robin Jones
Estefani Alarcon
Zachary Gheen
Emmaia Gelman
Chris Nickell
Colette Perold
Elizabeth Benninger
Victoria Grubs



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Meg Wiessner
Shaun Terry
Amy Diawara
Ayesha Omer
Christopher Porras
Robert Bell
Christopher VanDemark
Akshitha Dondapati
Bitu Mousavi
Brian Plungis
Ada Petiwala
Zavier Wingham
Ellis Garey

Student Groups who have signed on:

NYU Students for Justice in Palestine
NYU Jewish Voice for Peace
Neurodiversity Society at NYU
Map Club
La Herencia Latina
Black Student Union
The Incarceration to Education Coalition
Shuruq — the Islamic Heritage Month at NYU
Muslim Students Association
Advocate Coalition (Against) Trafficking
Mosaic: The Interfaith Student of Color Coalition
Arab Students United
Macro Social Work Student Network