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California Legislature

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April 30, 2024

Hon. Catherine E. Lhamon
Assistant Secretary
Office for Civil Rights
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20202

Re: Potential Title VI Violations at UCLA

Dear Assistant Secretary Lhamon,

I am writing to request that your office investigate potential violations of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and take swift action to prevent any further violations of students' civil rights. Specifically, as demonstrators have created encampments on UCLA's campus in response to the Israel-Hamas war, mounting evidence indicates that some demonstrators are engaging in dangerous, discriminatory practices that flagrantly violate the University's student conduct policies and likely violate Title VI's mandate that universities protect students from discriminatory harassment and from being denied equal access to an education on the basis of race or national origin, which as you know includes "shared ancestry or ethnic characteristics" or "citizenship or residency in a country with a dominant religion or distinct religious identity."

As the State Assemblymember elected to represent UCLA in the California Legislature and a longtime civil rights leader, I firmly support the First Amendment rights of all students to exercise free speech, to peacefully assemble, and to protest. Free and spirited debate on college campuses is a unique American value that must be protected. All students must have the opportunity to learn how to analyze various viewpoints while developing positions and advocating for them. Indeed, I have advocated strongly for the protection of students' free speech rights, including protected speech that I may find offensive, vulgar, or hateful.

In 1960, *Shelton v. Tucker* found "the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools."

Unfortunately, video footage published on social media and shared with my office, as well as first-hand accounts from my staff who were present on the campus, show that some students and demonstrators have gone beyond the bounds of protected First Amendment speech and engaged in unprotected and illegal conduct, including physically intimidating students by blocking their movements, pursuing them aggressively, and even engaging in violence.

Video footage and first-hand accounts from my staff indicate that demonstrators at UCLA are maintaining checkpoints throughout campus with signs such as "Zionists not welcome." Given that the overwhelming majority of Jews identify as Zionists, and the term is used to describe people of Israeli national origin, this can be very clearly interpreted to mean that Jewish and Israeli-American students may not enter University facilities, including libraries and lecture halls.

In one video posted on Twitter by the account @AGHamilton29, a Jewish student was refused access to the main entrance of Powell Library because he self-identified as a Zionist:

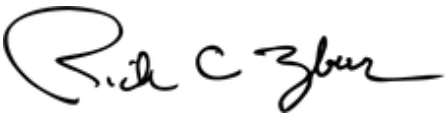
Jewish Student: "You guys want to prevent Jewish students from entering? Fine."
Demonstrator: "No, we've got a couple Jewish students. Are you a Zionist?"
Jewish Student: "Of course I'm Zionist."
Demonstrator: "Yeah, we don't let Zionists in."

I am alarmed and extraordinarily disappointed that the University has allowed the situation to deteriorate with seemingly little regard for Jewish and Israeli-American students' personal safety and their civil rights as enrolled students. These incidents are well-documented, and UCLA's administration has acknowledged their awareness of the incidents. Still, they have refused to take sufficient action to protect students' rights under Title VI.

Earlier today, UCLA Chancellor Block released a statement claiming that steps had been taken to protect students' civil rights, including increased security presence and the removal of barricades that protesters had erected to prevent certain students from accessing buildings on campus. When my office visited campus hours after the statement was released, they discovered that the library had been closed entirely and the barricades and checkpoints around the entire quad were still in place. My staff also witnessed a Jewish student being assaulted by more than a dozen demonstrators, as well as demonstrators allowing or denying allowed entry to parts of campus based on the perceived national origin or ethnicity of students. Photos taken by my staff show UCLA-contracted private security present during the assault but failing to intervene to protect the victim. While I appreciate that some attempts have been made by administrators to calm the situation, the alarming reality for Jewish and Israeli-American students has not changed, in spite of the Chancellor's statement.

Not only is UCLA allowing ongoing egregious violations of its own policies in place to prevent such conduct, but it is allowing potential violations of federal civil rights laws as well. I respectfully urge your office to take action immediately to investigate potential Title VI violations, to hold the University administration accountable, and to protect the civil rights of all students, including Jewish and Israeli-American students.

Sincerely,



RICK CHAVEZ ZBUR
Assemblymember, District Fifty One
Democratic Caucus Chair

CC:
California Attorney General Rob Bonta
University of California Board of Regents Chair Richard Leib
University of California, Los Angeles Chancellor Gene Block