

April 23, 2024  
William Menke  
Professor, DEES

Dear [Name] and other signatories of April 21 letter:

Thank you for your letter to me and the other members of the DEES Faculty.

I receive your concerns very seriously and am glad that you took the effort to express them in so detailed and poignant a way. I can see that you are hoping for a quick response, so I will try to provide a quick (to the extent that two day's delay can be considered quick) personal response that is limited to my own opinions and point of view. I do believe that my colleagues on the faculty also want to respond quickly; however, a meeting that might lead to a consensus reply takes time to organize, so I urge your forbearance in waiting for a more thorough response.

I understand that your letter is focused upon your concerns about the removal, arrest and academic suspension of student protestors that occurred on April 18 and its implication for the welfare of those students involved, the sense of safety of the student body in general and the principles of academic freedom and free speech. However, as those concerns have the broader context of the Israel-Hamas war and a nationwide increase in bigotry, I think that I first need to clarify where personally I stand on those matters - not as an attempt to change your or anyone else's views on these complicated subjects, but to set my response to your specific points in context:

Concerning Israel-Hamas war: The ongoing and indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by the Israel armed forces, whether it be by bombing or starvation, is wrong. The October 7 killing of Israelis by Hamas is wrong. The use of civilians as hostages or as human shields is wrong. The members of the Israeli and Hamas leadership who authorized these war crimes, and the combatants who carried them out, must be held accountable.

Concerning bigotry: The rising level of bigotry in the US, including anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, is unacceptable. People who commit these hate crimes must be held accountable.

That being said, you will understand that I endorse no specific roadmap to ending the violence and bigotry. Like a lot of other people, I am dismayed but have no new ideas. Consequently, I listen – carefully but critically – to what other people (including students like you) are saying. Some ideas I find thought-provoking, others repugnant. Concerning the latter, my reading of some of the ideas being expressed on the national stage amount to the proposition that one or the other of the Israelis or the Palestinians be gotten rid of. Neither proposition is at all acceptable to me.

Now, getting back to the specifics of your letter ...

(1) I am completely sympathetic to your view that the suspensions were unprecedented, counterproductive and causing harm to our community. Like you, I urge that they be lifted.

(2) I believe that a meeting would be helpful for improving mutual understanding and solidarity between DEES students and faculty and urge that we organize one or more of them. You might consider proposing a short but fairly detailed set of discussion issues, for my experience is that completely undirected meetings rarely accomplish much (though they do enable people to vent).

(3) Your point about the difficulty of focusing on class matters during this crisis is an important one. I will extend the due date for the graduate course that I instruct, at least to the last moment that have authority to extend it, which is the date that grades are due at the Registrar. I will urge the DEES leadership to look at the issue of leniency more broadly. It's a good idea, but some of the implementation issues may be thorny in some cases (e.g. its effect on graduations).

(4) I appreciate from your letter your view that that the demonstrations have been peaceful and non-disruptive and a legitimate form of the student body expressing its deeply-felt beliefs on the international situation. I am extremely proud that this is your goal. However, in preparation for writing this letter, yesterday evening I spent about four hours reading news accounts of the Campus protests, to try to understand to what degree they have been marred by expressions of bigotry. My tentative conclusion is that they have been marred (at the very least) by several egregious anti-Semitic acts that were intended to instill fear in Jewish members of our University community. Consequently, at least for now, I will not participate in in-person protests or rallies (but will continue to pursue advocacy in other forums).

Your point about me and other faculty members checking-in with the student that we interact with to assure their well-being is an excellent one that I certainly will take to heart and urge the same of my colleagues on the faculty.

I recognize that my response is very limited because it does not represent a consensus statement from the faculty. I'm hopeful that will come, but in the meantime, I hope that you are able to take some comfort in knowing that I (at least) have thought deeply about your words and have offered you what support I am able.

Sincerely,

Bill Menke