

Lessons in Repression

Silencing Campus Workers on Palestine Since October 7, 2023

Academic Freedom Initiative
A project of the Middle East Studies Association

REPORT
2026

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Lessons in Repression:
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Executive Summary

It has been three years since campuses across the US and Canada erupted in protest against Israel's genocide in the Gaza Strip. And despite public demonization, mass arrests, harassment, and punishment, history is already vindicating those students, and public opinion now squarely endorses the positions they were demonized for. But retaliation against campus workers speaking out on Palestine, including faculty and staff, has persisted.

This report is the first systematic study of retaliation against workers on campuses in the US and Canada related to Palestine since October 7, 2023, revealing the devastating effects this repression has had on individual lives, campus discussion of Palestine, and academic freedom generally.

The MESA Academic Freedom Initiative has compiled a database of retaliation incidents in higher education pertaining to Palestine-related speech since October 7, 2023.[1] Key findings from our data up to August 20, 2026 include:

- **Retaliation goes far beyond firing.** Of 196 recorded incidents of employer retaliation against employees speaking out on Palestine, nearly 40% (76) resulted in termination. Retaliation that does not rise to the level of termination is an even larger phenomenon.
- **All categories of academic workers are at risk.** Of the 162 individuals whose employment status was disclosed, 30% involved non-tenure track faculty or instructors, and 36% were tenured.
- **People of color are disproportionately affected.** Of the 134 cases recorded in the AFI database in which respondents' identification is known, two-thirds were people of color: 30% SWANA; 10.5% Black; and 27% other POC. Additionally, 16.5% identify as Jewish. More than half of those targeted whose gender is known are women. Such retaliation compounds the abuse of already racist and sexist work environments.
- **Most retaliation is not for classroom speech.** Of the 196 cases in the AFI database, only 11% involved classroom interactions, 54% stemmed from other on-campus speech such as protests, 16% were for off-campus speech or activity, 12% for social media posts, and in 8% of cases, the reasons for punishment were not disclosed.
- **Universities use the facade of anti-discrimination investigations to pursue politically motivated retaliation.** Investigations are often conducted in an arbitrary or opaque manner that lack basic procedural safeguards for those accused. And while most anti-discrimination offices rely on staff with civil rights or education backgrounds, some schools have started using former law enforcement or prosecutors instead. One school employed a former FBI counterterrorism agent, and another had a former prosecutor who was also a pro-Israel activist colluding with their local Hillel.

Lessons in Repression

Based on interviews with 31 employees of higher education institutions in the US and Canada who faced retaliation after October 7, 2023, we have identified a set of tactics that higher education institutions have used to stifle Palestine advocacy and pedagogy. These are the lessons we have learned about institutional repression strategies and tactics, including:

- Collectively arresting faculty, students, and staff at protests
- Making false and inflammatory public accusations against workers, contributing to networked harassment
- Criticizing and disciplining employees for their social media and other extramural speech
- Pursuing frivolous investigations prompted by spurious complaints
- Pursuing long, drawn-out investigations
- Relying on unprofessional, hostile, and biased investigators
- Obscuring complaints to make defence against them difficult
- Following arbitrary investigatory and HR processes without clarification
- Dominating the narrative and preventing employee perspectives from being heard
- Silencing punished employees with NDAs
- Allowing investigations to go cold without conclusion
- Not rehiring an employee instead of outright firing them

- Making up pretextual policies
- Use of pretextual accusations of professional misconduct
- Surveilling syllabi
- Exaggerating threats to produce unrealistic representations of campuses as violent
- Terminating employees without cause

This report offers a set of tools for resisting these conditions and points readers to resources for asserting their rights and insisting on their academic freedom. People have come together to stand up for their basic civil liberties and to expand the fight for academic freedom and faculty autonomy—which in the US has declined 50 percent since 2015, according to the 2026 Academic Freedom Index—despite the remarkable array of powers aligned against them.[2] There are lessons to be learned from their experiences.

Lessons Learned

Employees at every level have pushed back against the punishing and intimidating actions of their employers. This is a list of lessons learned from employees' successful efforts to stand up for themselves and others, including recommended actions one can take when targeted as well as actions to consider as good preventative practice:

- Create a paper trail. Download emails and record the time, date, and content of all communications and meetings. Write summaries of any oral conversations as soon as possible after the interaction. Email yourself and/or a trusted colleague a record of any unusual campus or classroom interactions using a non-work email. Such records will help you challenge misrepresentations of your behavior or file an appeal if needed.
- Read your faculty handbook so that you understand both your rights and institutional expectations, and can better advocate for yourself in meetings with administrators.
- Learn which academic freedom principles apply to your case so that you can assert your rights with confidence, mobilize your colleagues who may care more about academic freedom than about Palestine, and stand up to any bullying or aggressive behavior by administrators and/or investigators.
- Join MESA—even if you're not in Middle East studies. Whether or not you are a member, you can call on the Committee on Academic Freedom for scholarly solidarity. MESA's letters can pressure your administration and increase your credibility among colleagues.
- Join your union if possible. Being a union member enables you to make use of their resources, experience, and solidarity and can make it easier to demand your rights and win them back.
- Join the AAUP and your campus chapter if there is one. This provides community, and it can increase your knowledge of academic freedom rights, enabling you to mobilize a larger support network in campaigns to assert your rights.
- Find allies and community on campus. Their support, experience, and contacts can make the practicalities of standing up for your academic freedom rights more efficient and reduce a sense of isolation or of being gaslit.
- Use your personal email address, not email hosted by your institution's computers when appropriate.
- Coordinate (or ask others to coordinate) different organizations on campus to strengthen a defence campaign.
- Control the narrative about your case as much as possible to help prevent or counter exaggerations and misconstruals of your behavior.
- Conduct a risk assessment, taking into consideration factors such as your employee status (tenured, contingent, etc.), your citizenship status, and your position within your department and among colleagues. Be realistic and don't exaggerate the threats.
- Remember that tenure still offers protections that can encourage you to be an ally and take on roles that those without tenure cannot risk.

Recommendations

To institutions:

- Protect academic freedom by not only pronouncing its principles publicly but ensuring they are implemented when employees are being attacked.
- Reject the IHRA definition of antisemitism that falsely conflates Israel with Judaism and anti-Zionism with antisemitism and enables the weaponization of antisemitism claims.
- Ensure that Title VI hearings have procedural protections comparable to Title IX.
- Ensure that Title VI investigators conduct investigations that respect academic freedom.
- Ensure that Title VI and EEO officers are educated about the weaponization of antisemitism that can happen through Title VI complaints by ensuring they read the MESA-AAUP report, *Discriminating Against Dissent.*[3]
- Do not adopt antisemitism trainings that conflate anti-Zionism with antisemitism.
- Avoid policies that seek to make Zionism a protected class, and ensure criticism of Zionism is treated as protected speech.
- Ensure that university leaders and administrators do not fan the flames of social media harassment.
- Take steps to protect your employees from the politically motivated harassment of outside agitators.
- Ensure that administrators and governing boards respect the importance of faculty involvement in shared governance processes when creating or changing institutional policies and in determining responses to governmental demands for information or institutional actions.
- Ensure that administrators entertain faculty resolutions that protect unpopular teaching and research as well as controversial speech and forms of expressive activity.

To faculty, staff, student worker organizers:

- Strengthen your unions, associations, and AAUP chapters by explaining to all employees how these organizations can help support them in the face of growing threats against academic freedom.
- Use this report in your membership drives to help potential members understand the threats they face and their need for these organizations.
- Reach out to contingent workers and make them an equal part of your organization.
- Hold educational campaigns explaining how the repression of Palestine-related expression is a threat to everyone's academic freedom. Draw on the MESA-AAUP report, *Discriminating Against Dissent.*[4]
- Maintain a list of allied lawyers who are willing to support higher education employees pro bono or for a reduced fee.
- Share a curated list of advice sources with your existing and new members, including this report, the AAUP Center for the Defence of Academic Freedom First Aid Kit, Resources for Fighting Weaponized Title VI Investigations, and the digital security checklist.

Political Context: Heightened Protests and Government Interference

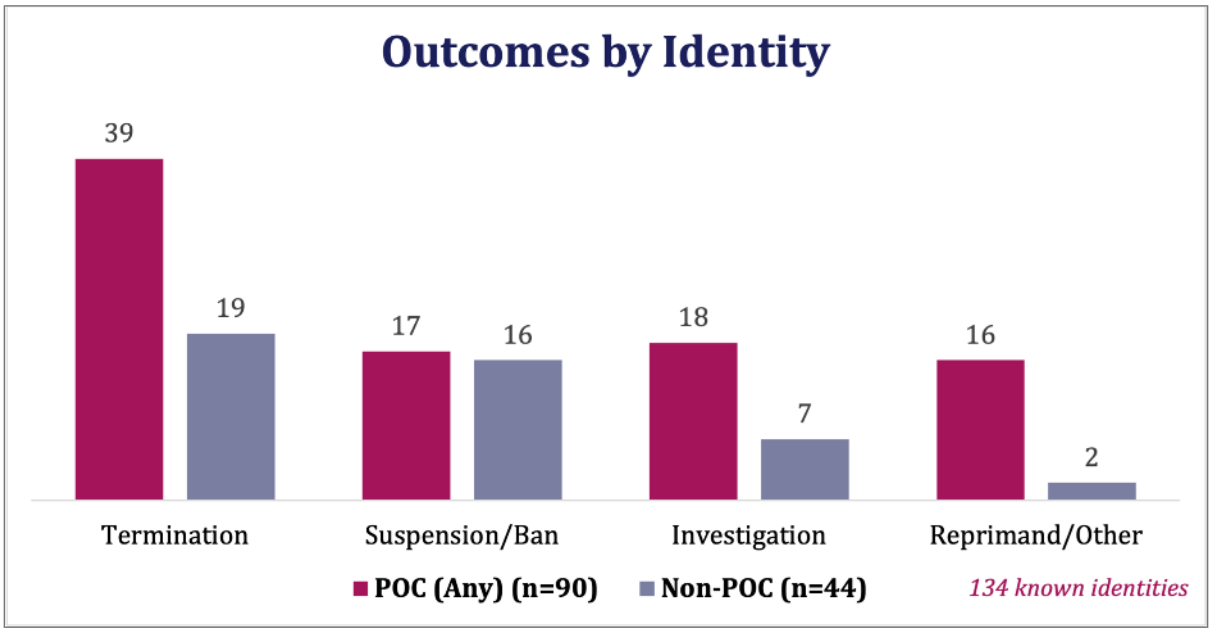
The crackdown on higher ed workers occurred in a context of heightened protests against the genocide and in support of Palestinian rights across North America (and beyond), with some campuses seeing levels of activism not witnessed since the Vietnam War, alongside the intensification of anti-democratic tendencies among government and university leaders. Civic engagement was met with criminalization, securitization, disciplinary actions, and concerted stifling of free expression. By spring 2024, encampments and protests had occurred at 140 campuses across 45 states in the US, and 25 campuses across Canada.[5] Universities, like governments, have defined and treated ever broader sets of issues and groups of people as a security problem. In the US, more than three thousand protestors (mainly students) were arrested or detained as of July 2024, by campus, local, and state police.[6] Violence was used against students by state, campus, and non-state actors.[7] Alarming shows of disproportionate force against the anti-genocide protests became commonplace.

The Context of Austerity and Threat

The current suppression of political expression grew within the neoliberal structure of higher education that has indebted institutions (to the tune of $350-$500 billion in the US) and corporatized administrators, undermining values like academic freedom. Canadian higher education is likewise under severe financial strain.[8] Four elements contribute to universities' limited resistance against attacks on academic freedom: politicized donor pressure; ideologically driven government funding; ideological views held by university boards and trustees, administrators, and faculty; and reliance on exploited and vulnerable contingent labor. These pressures supported administrators' tendencies towards anticipatory obedience and increased pressure on people in precarious jobs, making them afraid to talk about Israel or Zionism.[9] As one targeted faculty member we interviewed who has been compelled into early retirement described it, "neoliberal precarity is directly serving Zionism" by providing financial excuses for political purges.[10]

Responding to budget shortages and reduced government funding, a spate of universities have eliminated programs, laid off employees, merged, or shut their doors—part of the tectonic shifts undermining higher ed globally.[11] We interviewed targeted faculty and staff at Washington University and Emerson College, for example, schools that were publicly known to be under severe financial strain. They believed that these financial pressures encouraged university administrators to crack down on Palestine protests to avoid financial penalization by donors or government actors.[12]

These structural conditions, of course, do not affect all campus workers equally. Discrimination on the basis of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other factors compounds these issues.[13] AFI's research found that people of color are disproportionately affected by employer retaliation. Of the 134 cases recorded in the AFI database in which respondents' identification is known, two-thirds were people of color: 30% SWANA; 10.5% Black; and 27% other POC. Additionally, 16.5% identify as Jewish.[14] The targeting of racial and ethnic minorities has occurred in a context in which the federal government is attacking diversity initiatives in an explicit bid to undermine equal opportunity efforts.[15] In addition, more than half of those targeted whose gender is known are women. Of the 147 cases 55.8% are women, 38.8% are men, and 5.4% non-binary.[16]



Donors Driving University Retaliation

As a result of reduced government funding and administrative bloat, many universities are financially dependent on wealthy donors who have wielded their influence to intervene in university responses to protests against the genocide and education about Palestine.

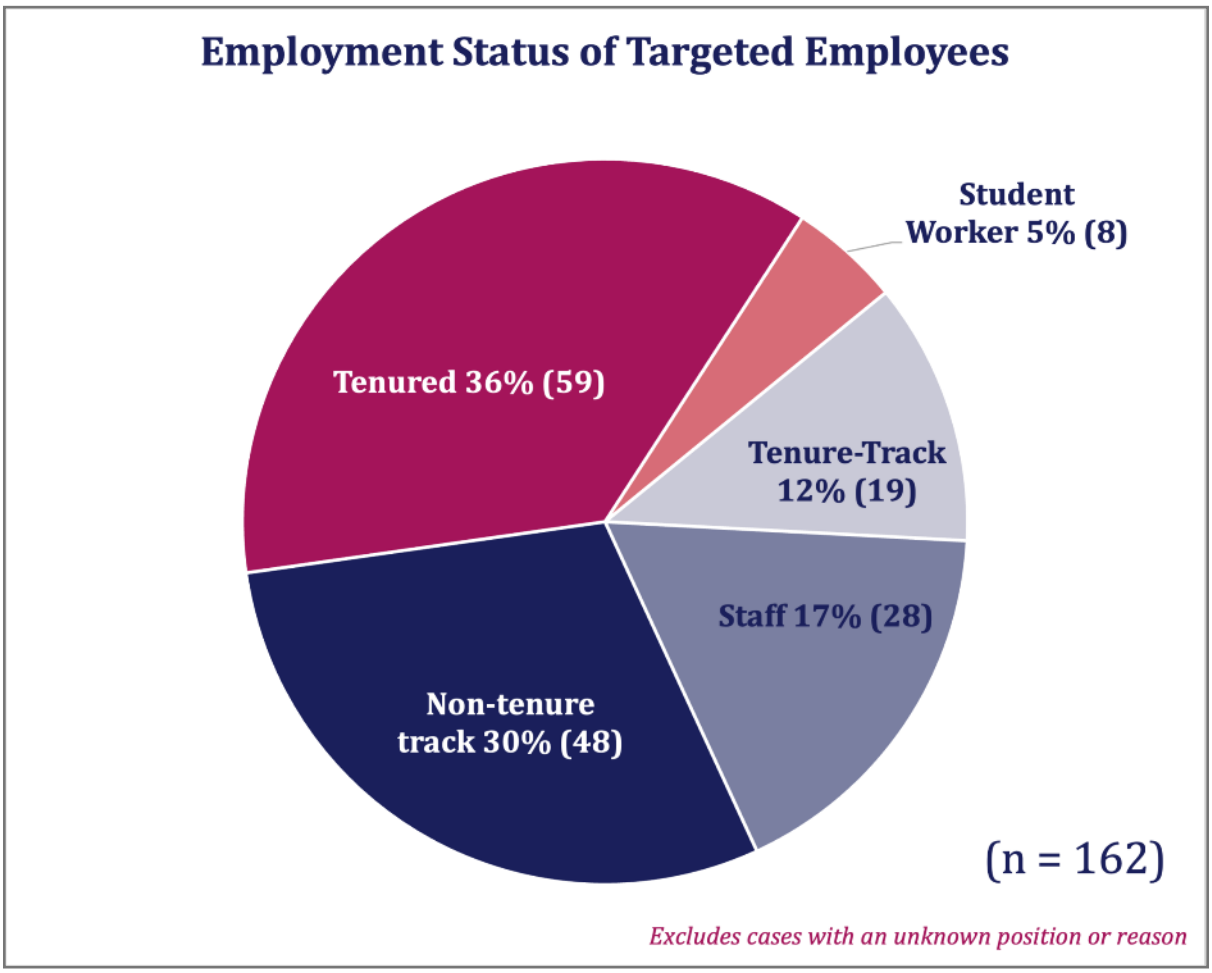
Politically motivated donors have triggered university retaliation against employees. Shaping the climate at the University of Pennsylvania, for example, is Cheryl Peisach, a trustee married to the treasurer of the Natan and Lidia Peisach Family Foundation, which in 2023 donated $100,000 to Canary Mission.[17] Canary Mission is a "political organization that uses its website to engage in defamatory attacks against college students who advocate for Palestinian rights, against student and other organizations engaged with this issue, and against faculty who teach, or speak publicly, about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."[18] Its dossiers were used by U.S. immigration authorities to target pro-Palestine activists as part of the Trump administration's broad ideological deportation campaign.[19] When a professor occupying an endowed chair at the University of Pennsylvania was targeted through an online campaign by pro-Israel organizations and commentators for pro-Palestine posts on her personal X account with the false claim that the professor was an antisemite, the donor funding her position announced the withdrawal of their support.[20] The professor said in an interview with us that, according to a dean, donor pressures had led the university to encourage her to retire, which she finally did in June 2026.[21]

Examples of donor influence have been documented elsewhere, too:[22]

- Northwestern University trustees "felt empowered to dictate faculty hiring, override academic protections, and leverage vast financial influence to silence speech. This is a deeply concerning assault on higher education."[23]
- Harvard donor William Ackman demanded a "blacklist of students who disagree with his views" and The Wexner Foundation cut ties with the Harvard Kennedy School because the university "failed to take a 'clear and unequivocal stand against' the Hamas attack on Israel."
- Leon Cooperman threatened to cease donating to Columbia University because of a walkout organized by Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voice for Peace.[24]
- Donors at the University of Pennsylvania placed direct pressure on departments and centers that rely on them financially, demanding they not co-sponsor a Palestinian literature festival in a way "that undermined their ability to function."[25]

Contingency Within Precarity

The decline of tenure and rise in contingent academic labor—nearly 70 percent of all instructional staff appointments in US higher education and over half in Canada[26]—has made more educators vulnerable to attack and retaliation.



Precarious employees working as contingent instructors are structurally most vulnerable. A professor we interviewed said that their public university's union adjunct grievance officer reported that they were attending hearings several times every week, with some 90% of the cases being about Palestine.[27] While only about one-third of the retaliation cases with known employment positions and retaliation reason involved non-tenure track instructors, this is likely a significant undercount, given that contingent workers often can be fired or non-renewed without stated cause, leaving many such cases undetectable. They are vulnerable because they often do not have work contracts or union protections and teaching on a class-by-class basis often isolates them from wider networks of solidarity. As low-paid labor, they may be even more reliant on the job for survival, compelled to comply with unfair demands and discouraged from challenging their superiors. With fewer means of fighting back, they were often easy targets.

Government Interference

At the start of the genocide, the federal government began directly pressuring colleges and universities to crack down on campus speech pertaining to Palestine in the name of fighting antisemitism. The most important tool for this campaign was Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits institutions that receive federal financial assistance from engaging in discrimination on the basis of "race, color, or national origin." In the last two months of 2023, the federal government opened more Title VI antisemitism investigations against higher education institutions than in all previous years combined, and continued to launch record-breaking numbers of investigations

in 2024 and 2025. In most of the complaints that are publicly available, criticisms of Israel that make no mention of Jews or Judaism are equated with antisemitism. Yet dozens of schools signed agreements with the Department of Education agreeing to submit to further government monitoring—including sharing names of students, faculty, and staff accused of antisemitism—as a condition for closing these probes.[28]

Increasing the pressure on university administrators were six Congressional hearings in which 18 university presidents and other senior administrators were questioned on the pretextual grounds that they weren't doing enough to tackle antisemitism on their campuses. Across these hearings, at least seven faculty members were mentioned by name during questioning. Northwestern University's Steven Thrasher was suspended by his employer shortly after being singled out by name in a congressional hearing and was later denied tenure.[29] Widely recognized as McCarthyite spectacle, these aggressive hearings, held between December 2023 and July 2025, propelled many university administrators to perform obedience by shutting down pro-Palestine expression, imposing policies dissuading public political expression, and disciplining faculty and students who spoke out for Palestine.[30] Few have challenged the dangerous conflation of criticism of Israel with antisemitism, or the claim that constitutionally protected speech critical of Zionism was dangerous to Jewish people—itself a form of antisemitism.[31]

The Trump administration also created a multi-agency Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism which has used the pretext of fighting antisemitism to attack racial and gender equity efforts more broadly.[32] The Task Force soon began threatening to cut off billions of federal research funding to universities. Although the larger political goals include control of knowledge production and civil society, and the curtailment of the means of democratic protest to dismantle democratic governance generally, protection of Israel and silencing of pro-Palestine expression has been a tactic of bludgeoning political organization on campus and silencing individuals' political expression.[33]

The politically specific contours along which US higher education has become, as the AAUP says, "a target of a massive extortion racket" by the government is clear.[34] The agreement Northwestern University made to pay $75 million to the Trump administration in exchange for regaining access to about $790 million in federal research funding—which has been criticized by legal experts as violating the First Amendment and federal antidiscrimination law—illustrates this.[35] It was explicitly anti-Palestinian and anti-protest, overturning the pact the university made with protestors that promised to support visiting Palestinian students and faculty. Without funding independent of political ideology, universities remain vulnerable and likely to sway in accordance with demands that run counter to principles of academic freedom.

Political pressure also impacted Canadian institutions. Provincial ministers made public allegations of antisemitism against academic staff and students, criticized academic discussion of "Palestine and genocide," and called for the removal of statements on departmental websites expressing pro-Palestinian views. As the Canadian Association of University Teachers points out, "these interventions highlight important concerns about institutional autonomy, a condition necessary for the exercise of academic freedom."[36]

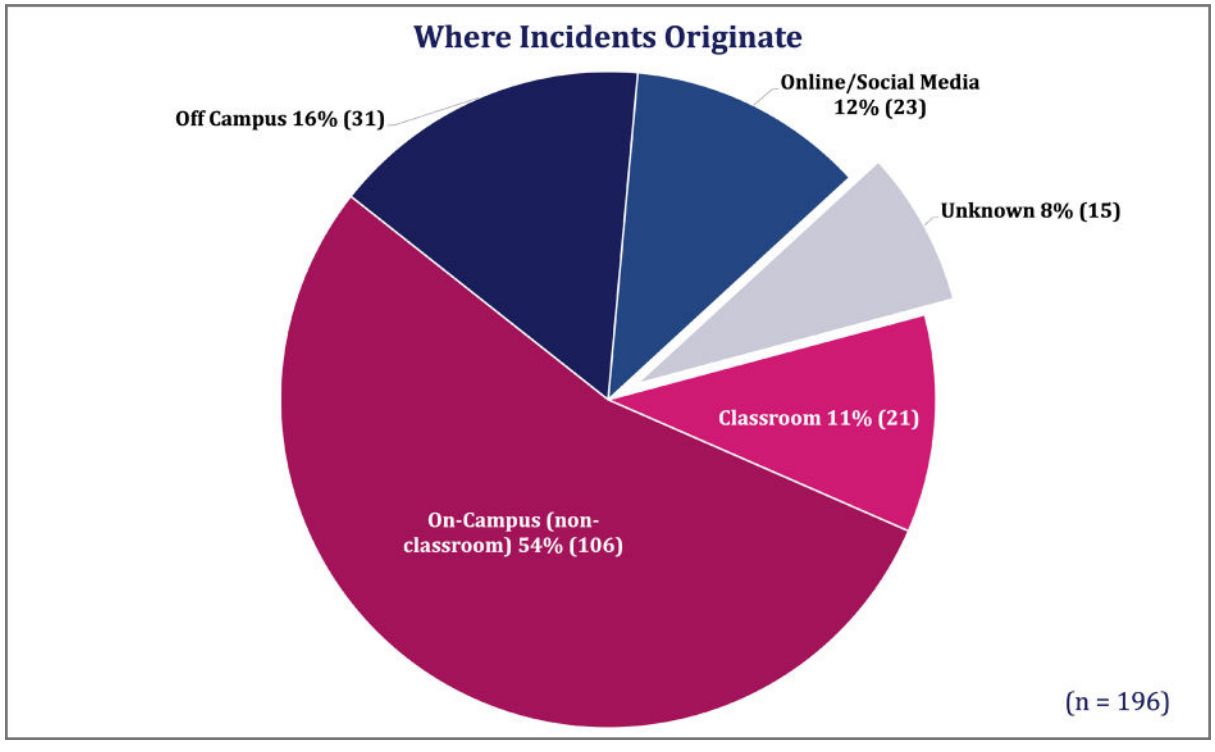
Lessons in Repression: An Appetite for Punishment

Triggering Contexts

The severe treatment that universities meted out to employees speaking in support of Palestinian rights or criticizing Israel's policies has been not only unprofessional and unfair but also has been taken to extremes. Fabricated and minimal infractions received exaggerated punishment. In contrast to the unleashing of militarized police against student protestors, filmed for all to see, the draconian response to employees' public responses to the genocide took hidden, bureaucratic forms.[37]

The most common excuses given to our interviewees for their punishment after weaponized claims of antisemitism were accusations of pedagogical inappropriateness, budgetary reasons and restructuring, claims about security, and citations of policy violation. Faculty and staff involved with Palestine-related events and student groups were also in the crosshairs. Of the 196 incidents in the AFI database, 11% involved classroom interactions, 54% were about other on-campus speech or activity, 16% were for off-campus speech or activity, and 12% for social media posts, suggesting that teaching is a relatively less common context provoking punishment.[38]

In some instances, administrators' politically skewed interpretations of speech about Palestine or Israel led to sanction, with speech or action against the genocide, in support of Palestinian rights, or critical of Israel deemed antisemitic or otherwise unacceptable. In cases involving contingent instructors and staff with no union protection, employers were not obligated to justify themselves, leaving employees terminated without cause to connect the dots of their experiences to determine cause. In other cases, obfuscatory pretexts were invoked to provide a backdoor cause for termination or other retaliation, or to provide a screen of plausible deniability for administrators.



Arrest Everyone - Protest Roundups and Police Brutality

At some schools, many faculty members were targeted together after a single incident when the university unleashed police against a protest. When faculty were near a protest or encampment, administrators could use their presence against them by sweeping them up in mass arrest campaigns. Their arrest was often then used as a pretext for further punishment, including suspension and investigation.

In several cases we recorded, faculty were at an encampment as witnesses trying to protect students. University claims about their involvement gave administrators a basis for punishing faculty for policy violation or encouraging disruption, such as in the case of Sang Hea Kil. (An independent arbitrator ruled that she should be reinstated.[39]) At Washington University, six faculty were suspended, four of whom were also arrested; at Indiana University, seven faculty were arrested and banned from campus; and at CUNY's Brooklyn College, six faculty and staff were investigated after they linked arms to protect protesting students from police aggression.[40] Faculty at Wash U and CUNY were falsely accused of participating in setting up the encampment and refusing to disperse when ordered by the police; faculty at Indiana U were arrested for trespassing. MESA's letter about the Indiana University incident described the university's actions "as excessively harsh punishment meted out to campus community members engaged in peaceful protest in conformity with university rules."[41] In another notable dragnet, Harvard University barred 26 faculty members from the university's main library after they held a silent "study-in" to protest the treatment of students suspended from the library for a similar demonstration.

When universities called in police against student demonstrators, faculty and staff were also arrested and brutalized. There were many knock-on effects from these arrests, as a case at Indiana University illustrates. Seven faculty were arrested while trying to protect students from police assault. As one of the professors caught up in the melee when police came in to disperse the protest explained, he was not demonstrating: "I felt the students had every right to demonstrate, and I went down there just to show my support. When I saw the state troopers roll up in their riot gear with their assault rifles, I stepped in between them to try and stop the police from attacking the students. I was arrested trying to preserve the safety of those students." The state troopers got aggressive and knocked him to the ground and arrested him. Subsequently, the university banned him from campus for a year. He worried that a record of his punishment remains in his file as something that can be used against him in the future. Since the senate bill SEA 202 was signed into law in March 2024, Indiana faculty are to be subject to post-tenure reviews at a minimum every five years. The professor understood that the university wanted to use his record of being punished as a disciplining threat, something that could be used against him during a review.[42]

Although the university attempted to push criminal charges against the arrested faculty, the Monroe County prosecutor refused to press any charges, believing the constitutionality of the arrests was dubious at best. The professor received death threats after this incident, which has left him with health problems. The threats and assault on his person were "challenging and traumatic," he said.[43] The violence that university leadership deployed against protestors via the police and the additional suspensions created a spectacle of punishment to silence faculty expression and limit public discussions of Palestine.

These incidents exemplify how many universities' tolerance of political expression contracted when Israel's genocide brought students, faculty, staff, and community members together in pro-Palestine demonstrations. The excessive disciplinary actions against groups of faculty suggest that administrations sought to stamp out free expression in a definitive way to silence the targeted employees and intimidate others.

Feed the Mob - Social Media Incitement and Networked Harassment

Social media sometimes triggered and amplified allegations against university employees. Interviewees across multiple universities described online campaigns that generated complaints, attracted media attention, and intensified pressure on administrators to punish targeted employees. Crowdsourced doxing and harassment have been facilitated by the mandatory publication of syllabi and anonymous reporting tip-lines, where bad faith actors can make spurious complaints with decontextualized evidence to generate outrage. Academics' public expression on social media has also made them more vulnerable to attacks. Reports from the UN and a Canadian think tank confirm the threat of social media to freedom of expression since the genocide in Gaza.[44]

Many of our interviewees reported being targeted by social media and hate email campaigns, with some receiving threats of violence so credible that they requested police protection. The harassment campaigns frightened targeted employees. At MIT, a student's claim on X about Prof. Michel DeGraff unleashed what DeGraff experienced as an "online mob" against him. DeGraff, who is Haitian-American, never taught the student who publicly accused him of endangering Jewish students by speaking critically of Hillel—a Zionist organization that trains Jewish students in pro-Israel and anti-Palestinian activism.[45] The online backlash he faced was replete with racist insults, doxxing, and threats.[46]

None of the people with whom we spoke indicated that their university took any action to protect them from this online violence. Instead, some university leaders added tinder to the fire by circulating disparaging comments about the employee publicly. Universities were part of the network of harassment in which public pressure, institutional decision-making, and disciplinary action reinforced one another.

Social media harassment is often gendered. When a tenured professor at the University of Pennsylvania declined to participate in a documentary being produced by a vocally Zionist student activist, she was targeted by "wildly aggressive social media campaigns" for her private social media posts about Palestine. She was deluged by hundreds of violent hate emails that she understood were intended to be intimidating. Most included demands that she be raped, many involved references to excrement, and some contained death threats. She insisted that not responding to or giving into the intimidation is the best response, but admitted to being made wary, "because if somebody says, 'you should be raped' enough, you do watch your back a little bit." Following this torrent of online hate, she was subject to a campaign by donors, members of the Board of Trustees, alumnae, and outside actors calling for her dismissal.[47]

In some of the cases we have examined, social media served as a channel for criticism and harassment of faculty and staff, and in some it became the focus of disciplinary scrutiny. In extending oversight to employees' off-campus and online expression, several institutions adopted approaches that violate one of the American Association of University Professors' core pillars of academic freedom: "freedom from institutional censorship or discipline when speaking or writing as citizens."[48] Even in cases where university administrators told an employee that their online speech was not university business, it triggered university retaliation.[49]

A related method of online persecution is surveillance of syllabi, which has been on the rise at the state, university, and department level in many schools. It is a measure apparently calculated to encourage self-censorship, and it certainly leaves employees feeling uneasy.[50] Seven states (as of August 2026) have mandated that course syllabi be made publicly available.[51] The targets are faculty teaching what right-wing activists have determined are "controversial subjects" like gender, race, and sexuality and Middle East studies. Within universities, faculty members teaching or researching Palestine have also faced heightened scrutiny through internal review processes that violate academic freedom.This surveillance is an intimidating attack on academic freedom,[52] and, as a professor who has faced retaliatory harassment at the University of Arkansas said, it is inhibiting: "It makes you feel like you're doing something wrong. That's the whole mind trick of this. I feel like our syllabi are things to be proud of," she said, "but it has a chilling effect."[53] The syllabi portals allow, if not invite, people anywhere, without connection to the university, to pass judgment on teachers' pedagogy.[54]

Networked harassment took its toll on targets in different ways, but the attacks usually followed a standard pattern: A public statement in support of Palestine triggers an online backlash among right wing and/or Zionist individuals and groups. Outside actors, students, or other faculty prompt a cascade of posts and messages directed at the target and/or their employer, often with public calls for disciplinary action against the employee. This flood of communications becomes a managerial and PR headache for institutional leaders who have then instituted disciplinary action in an attempt to appease the harassers.

Case Study: Avalanching Hate

This was the sequence launched when Bret Gustafson, an anthropology professor at Washington University in St. Louis, tweeted positively about a protest at the home of AIPAC's head in November 2023.[55] First, Gustafson received an avalanche of hate email when an account called @StopAntisemites reposted his tweet with a caption that misconstrued its meaning. This led to criticism of him on X as well as Instagram, Facebook, and Rate My Professor. He received tens of death threats and violent exhortations, such as "die terrorist lover." The harassment was personal: "I

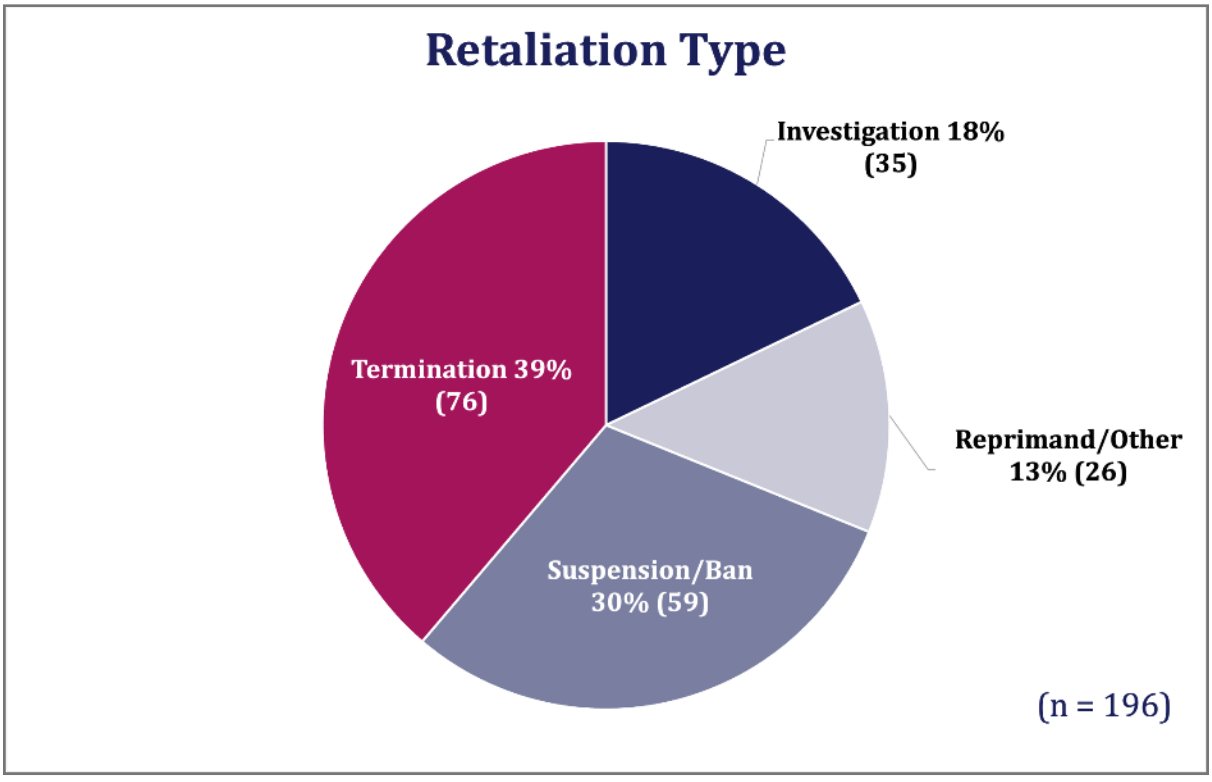
got a direct email from [a student] and her mother saying how horrible I was and I was going to get what I deserved." He was doxxed, with pictures of his house posted online with threats. One poster said they were coming to his office hours, leading Gustafson to seek police protection. "That was definitely nerve wracking," he admitted. Somebody called his children's high school saying that a parent of students at the school was an antisemite. Zionist factions on campus spread the furor, and the university received calls to fire him. Instead of supporting Gustafson, the administration assigned him minders: the chair of his department and an associate dean of arts and sciences attended his classes "in order to ensure student safety" from him, a reflection of the harassing discourses on X that were about "students not feeling safe with this professor." He dealt with this imposition by trying to ignore it.[56]

Punish With Process - Frivolous Investigations and Falsities

The crackdown since 2023 reveals the expanding range of speech that is targeted and range of political stances that are falsely labeled "antisemitic," treating the description of Israel's actions in Gaza as genocide as suspect, and delegitimizing scholarly analyses of Israeli and pro-Israeli behavior.[57]

Targeted employees were denied due process and a chance to respond to accusations.

Fifteen of our 31 interviewees faced investigations based on complaints of antisemitism related to their teaching about Israel or Palestine, expression of support for Palestinian rights, or speech or action critical of Israeli policy. Most of the targeted faculty knew or had reasons to assume that a student made a claim of bias or discrimination against them for one of these reasons, prompting the school's Title VI or similar office to launch an investigation. In four cases, colleagues' complaints triggered the employer retaliation or added to pressure to discipline the targeted employee.



Several features of these investigations are notable. The claims were often flimsy, based on complaints with little or no evidence, sometimes by people who did not pursue the investigatory process, and they frequently included outright falsehoods. Investigation timelines were protracted, charges were vague, and administrators refused to clarify matters. Targeted employees were denied due process and a chance to respond to accusations. Overall, investigations were run in an unprofessional and sloppy manner by administrators who were often overtly hostile and biased.

These investigations themselves were forms of punishment and a pretext for further retaliation. As Judith Norman, a professor at Trinity College in Texas who was repeatedly and spuriously accused of antisemitism stated: "the complaints themselves have been the punishment, have been the intimidation and were designed to be. … These complaints were nonsense. They were factually false and yet going through them has itself been the punishment."[58]

No Accusation is Too Petty or Spurious

Among the tactics typical of the fair process violations that our interviewees described was the launching of investigations based on petty claims or absurd objections. A professor was called into their institution's anti-discrimination office after two students complained of feeling alienated from the learning process because the professor used the term "state of Israel" instead of "Israel."[59] University administrators exercised no discernment about whether these were worth pursuing. Similarly, universities investigated and punished employees based on complaints fabricated by students about discriminatory behavior. In the case of two interviewees, the complainants made assertions—about a teacher's behavior, what they said, where they were—with no evidence. In both cases, the investigator determined that all but one of the allegations were completely unsubstantiated. Despite these fabrications, our interviewees were disciplined.[60]

Case Study: A Blatant Political Attack

Any action on behalf of Palestinians or speech supporting Palestinian rights or criticizing Israel's policies could attract allegations of antisemitism. Andrea Brower, an untenured professor at Gonzaga University, faced a "non-discrimination policy" investigation after a single accusation from an American colleague who had served in the Israeli army, invoking the university's anti-discrimination policy. She later faced additional allegations from other colleagues. The investigation, which was pursued from November 2024 to July 2025, along with the harassment she faced drove her to leave her job. In her account, she describes a tense campus environment in which political expression about the genocide and deemed pro-Palestine by faculty and students prompted public excoriation by faculty and the university president. In her case, colleagues on a faculty forum accused her of Holocaust denial because she attended a protest where genocide was mentioned. She had previously been accused of Holocaust denial for writing a letter, signed by over 70 faculty, which simply named atrocities against Palestinians and supported students' right to protest. She was also accused of harassing Jewish faculty by forwarding a notice for a student-led vigil for all lives lost scheduled on October 6, 2024 to an online faculty forum. The complainants were upset that this was too close to October 7. The complainant also accused her of antisemitism for circulating a student open letter against the university's protest policy, because the letter described administrators' actions as sinister, and, despite there being no reference to Jews in the letter, "sinister" was an ancient antisemitic trope.

The Title IX office handling the case communicated with Brower in a confusing and inconsistent way, first telling her that the investigation wouldn't proceed while she was on pre-approved medical leave and then saying that it would go ahead anyway. They responded sporadically to emails, sometimes canceling meetings as they were about to begin or not communicating a meeting location. Brower fought to have the original internal investigator, a retired FBI counterterrorism agent, David Gomez, replaced due to his anti-Arab bias, which Brower thought was evident from his publications.[61] She was then interviewed by someone who she discerned was unfamiliar with the political context of Palestine. The investigator asked a question about whether she had ever critiqued "the Jewish people" for committing genocide. Brower believed that the question wrongly conflated the state of Israel with Jewish people reflecting the language of the complaint against her and was due to the investigator's ignorance. As Brower observed, "The office doing the investigation should have been able to look at the complaints and see them as a blatant political attack and dismiss the case. Do their due diligence. But instead, they chose to leave me in an investigation for seven months while they knew I was on medical leave."

During the first months of her leave, Brower and her lawyers were forbidden from communicating with the investigator. The anti-discrimination office then reversed their policy and told her she could communicate with the investigator, at which point she discovered that during the investigator's interviews

with some of her colleagues, they made additional complaints against her to which she was not allowed to respond. As Brower explained in her interview with MESA, although the initial three complaints of antisemitism were found to be unsubstantiated, Brower was found guilty of various behaviors deemed problematic, including not understanding the historical significance of Israel, not giving enough credence to the Zionist perspective, and making Jewish students and faculty uncomfortable. None of these claims were investigated, Brower said, but instead conveyed to the provost and the dean "for intervention." When Brower learned that any decision about her fate was going to be left in the hands of the provost, who she believed was opposed to her for her labor organizing on campus, she decided to leave her position at the university.[62]

Taking Your Time

University administrators involved many employees in long and drawn-out disciplinary proceedings. The stress made the process itself a kind of penalty. Interviewees reported cases that extended months to years, with some that are still ongoing, with unexplained time lags between steps in the process. An instructor who was emailed about a complaint in fall was not investigated until spring.[63] A graduate student's investigation lasted 400 days, 325 more than the limit set by university policy.[64] Sometimes investigations were pursued for alleged infractions occurring in the past. HR staff and legal personnel called a professor into a meeting to question him about a class he had taught two years prior. (Among the "accusations" was his use of the term "Jewish settlers" to refer to Israeli settlers, who, due to Israel's discriminatory laws, are by definition nearly always Jews.)[65] Grievance processes pursued by professors who were subject to disciplinary procedures that did not abide by union contracts at two different institutions have remained unresolved for two years.[66]

Sending Biased Investigators

Several interviewees commented on the unresponsive and slipshod character of the offices investigating them, which reduced their confidence in the investigatory process even further. A graduate student instructor said they thought the investigator seemed new and didn't know how to answer questions about how the recorded material would be treated.[67] Other interviewees reported: "They promised resources [to support the employee after they were doxxed], but they never sent anything."[68] "My changes and corrections [to the written summary of a meeting] were never incorporated or reflected in the official summary of my interview with [the Title IX officer]. Nor are they incorporated or reflected anywhere in the Investigation Report."[69]

Non-response to queries, even from legal counsel, contradictory information, and general incompetence characterized anti-discrimination offices at both private and public institutions. In an especially egregious example at CUNY, a targeted employee was shown a photograph of people at a protest, with a demand to identify themselves, although the picture was not of them.[70] Whether a result of incompetence or politically motivated negligence, this shoddy work increased the chance that facts were overlooked, due process not followed, and witnesses treated inconsistently. Several interviewees were denied the opportunity to share their narrative, sometimes because they were never called in for a meeting, sometimes through intimidating behavior.

Hostile investigators turned investigative processes into biased and emotionally charged prosecutions, treating pro-Palestine viewpoints as presumptively suspect. Several of our interlocutors reported investigators' emotional outbursts, describing how their bellicose attitudes and antagonistic questioning turned meetings into interrogations. Investigators also framed questions as accusations in politically skewed ways. Several conflated "Jewish" with "Israeli," antisemitism with support for Palestinian human rights or opposition to the state of Israel's actions, and anti-genocide views with antisemitism. While some investigators may have been ignorant of the context and stakes of such conflations, others were obviously politically biased. An interviewee told us that the person investigating their case, Title IX coordinator for The New School, Rhonnie Jaus, had liked an "I stand with Israel" statement with an Israeli flag on someone's Facebook profile. The interviewee said that they were told by a colleague that the investigator had engaged in a group chat with the Hillel students who brought the complaint she was investigating.[71] Another interviewee discovered that the person investigating her worked on anti-terrorism issues for the Department of Homeland Security and published anti-Arab, anti-Muslim articles.[72] A Jewish staff member recalled his interview with the investigating officer in the Title IX office: "I was asked if I support Hamas. I was told that I don't support

Jews. I was told that I was belligerent, that I was fanning the flames. It was an interrogation."[73]

One investigator repeatedly accused a graduate student of not taking the investigation seriously. The graduate student explained the experience as "very frustrating, because I was attending these long meetings and spending a lot of time preparing for them. The investigation took over a year."[74] Yasmeen Hanoosh, a professor at Portland State University, filed a legal suit against her university in response to such treatment. The claim described the university investigator's final report as having "credited and extensively documented the subjective perceptions and concerns of Dr. Hanoosh's colleagues [who had brought complaints against her], while failing to ask her any questions regarding her own experiences within the department, including interpersonal dynamics, prior conflicts, or potential bias." Her legal claim asserts: "This asymmetrical treatment resulted in a report that amplified accusations against her while omitting exculpatory context and her own account of departmental interactions."[75] Biased investigations are not merely uncomfortable or frustrating, they lead to essentially predetermined results.

Obscure with Process

Many interviewees described disciplinary or employment office processes in which administrators referred to complaints in general terms without identifying the substance of the allegations or providing details and documentation. Without access to the substance of the complaints, they were unable to prepare adequately for interviews or determine what evidence might be relevant to their defence. A person whose employment was terminated without a formal investigation said they were never informed of the specific basis for the decision or given an opportunity to respond to allegations. Instead, before their termination, their supervisor indirectly and repeatedly conveyed that they should avoid explicit references to Palestine because they could prompt student complaints.[76]

In another case, Mohja Kahf, a professor at the University of Arkansas was summoned to a meeting with her university's anti-discrimination office but received no information about the complaint under review. Following her lawyer's advice, she asked the presiding officer to clarify the allegations before answering any questions. The officer refused to do so. The professor later filed a public records request to obtain the complaint. She found an exchange between a graduate student, who had submitted a complaint about posters on the professor's door to the state governor's website, and the university's anti-discrimination office, in which the anti-discrimination office was trying to convince the student to make a formal complaint to them. The student refused and informed the office that she did not wish to pursue the matter. Despite this decision, the anti-discrimination office conducted an investigation and found the professor in violation of the university's discrimination policy.[77] Among the reasons cited was the contention that "'from the river to the sea' is understood by some Jews and Israelis as threatening and offensive."[78]

It is striking how many interviewees mentioned being ignored by administrators or encountering obfuscation when they sought information. "I got no response, which is one of their major tactics. They just don't respond."[79] A staff member investigated by the Title IX office filed a complaint that he was never given notice about the policies and codes he allegedly violated.[80] A graduate student investigated for beginning class thirty minutes late received only a screenshot of their email to students when informed of the complaint. Their employment lawyer repeatedly sought clarification about the alleged misconduct, but he received no response. "They kept putting things off instead of offering clarity or definite answers to things. This went on [for three months]."[81] In another case, a professor was informed that her use of a bullhorn during a protest violated the university's time, place and manner policy, but with no supporting evidence. When she requested further information, administrators provided video clips of her amplified remarks but did not explain how this was an alleged policy violation.[82]

Dominate the Narrative

The lack of clarity surrounding allegations was compounded for several interviewees by a lack of opportunity to respond to them. In one case, a professor was suspended in June (put on paid administrative leave), at which point the university hired a third-party investigator. But she was not interviewed until several months later. "Until that point they didn't even hear my narrative. I tried to reach out to them. They did not even allow me to share my narrative of what happened."[83]

In several cases, university leadership made public statements criticizing employees before investigations had concluded, or even before investigators had heard employees' accounts. Portland State University president Ann Cudd publicly condemned Dr. Yasmeen Hanoosh without naming her by referring to "a short video circulating that

includes a PSU professor speaking at an independent, non-university event off campus" and asserting that "PSU stands unequivocally against antisemitism, terrorism, and hate of any kind, including the statements made in this video."[84] Cudd made the statement disclosing sufficient information to make Hanoosh readily identifiable and which Hanoosh contends in her lawsuit against Cudd and the university "was defamatory, untrue, and harmful" before any investigation and with no conversation with the professor.[85]

Muzzle With NDAs

Several targeted employees were told they could not talk to anyone about the disciplinary process, and some were offered severance only on condition they sign a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). Typically, NDAs are signed when employees leave a workplace to ensure that sensitive information such as trade secrets remain private. In these cases, by contrast, universities have required NDAs in an attempt to control the narrative and prevent negative publicity that would damage their reputations as educational institutions that should foster free and open inquiry.

Our interviews suggest that vague and incomplete communications were not procedural failures but a recurring feature of obfuscatory disciplinary and investigatory processes. The process often left those under review uncertain about the motivations and goals of the investigating office or officers. There was a clear sense that the investigatory process and disciplinary procedures were intentionally mobilized to intimidate and silence political expression. There seems to have been little interest in ensuring a fair opportunity for employees to respond to allegations, or to follow procedure in order to reach an accurate account of events. Instead, processes were structured to intimidate, find evidence justifying punishment, or provide cover for biased university decisions.

"There was no process whatsoever… I think they were just trying to keep us quiet until the thing blew over."

Let it Fizzle Out

Many of these investigations have not been pursued or explicitly resolved, and punishments have been rescinded or quietly lifted without official resolution or explanation. This lackadaisical treatment confirms that many of the allegations are performative.

The suspensions of several professors at an institution ended with a letter instructing them not to repeat the alleged conduct, without any formal interview or investigative process. One of the professors described the experience as "a black box," stating: "There was never an investigation. They never called us in. They never interviewed us. They never talked to us. There was no process whatsoever… I think they were just trying to keep us quiet until the thing blew over."[86]

Both unofficial resolutions and non-resolutions confirm that these practices are means of intimidation and a performance of obeisance to government or other influential figures and organizations, rather than the correct implementation of legitimate policy.

The investigation of a contingent instructor targeted with a weaponized Title VI complaint fizzled out because they were not rehired. They described how it felt to have to move on with their case unresolved.

> I wasn't interviewed. They never answered the questions [about investigation procedures]. … I want a letter where they say that charges were dropped and this is not going to be a thing. I was told [by the union] this is probably the best it's going to get, but I know it's probably hanging somewhere, and that's kind of my concern.[87]

Don't Fire, When You Can Just Not Rehire, or Call It Something Else

Administrators invoked pretexts to justify their retaliation against employees, often referring to rules or circumstances that were not the real reasons for the university's actions. Misrepresentation of employee behavior as violating their contract was one common method. Issuing an outsized punishment for a minor infraction was another, such as CUNY's termination of a contingent employee for distributing a flyer with the CUNY logo and accepting a donation from a colleague—violations of the sort a department chair would only reprimand.[88] Exaggerations about employee behavior and responses to it were used to eliminate or intimidate them. Employees were terminated through indirect procedures: contingent instructors were "not rehired" and programs were "reoriented" and "paused." Multiple schools declared programs financially nonviable and forced out staff and instructors.

Several contingent instructors who had expected to continue their teaching at their school were not reappointed, and several scholars were denied promotion after a review for tenure or pre-tenure progression. Their non-rehiring came with no explanation, but followed complaints against them, their programs, or their public Palestine advocacy. At the City University of New York (CUNY), four contingent instructors were fired after participating in a pro-Palestine demonstration.[89] Three of these contingent instructors were officially "non-reappointed" and given no official reason for their dismissal. The euphemistic Human Resources language does little to obscure what is in effect a termination.

At Harvard, at least three centers of academic programming related in part to Palestine were shut down or restructured and their directors and staff fired or not rehired in 2025: the Harvard Divinity School's Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative and the Harvard School of Public Health's research partnership with Birzeit University in the West Bank were both suspended.[90] The latter's director, Mary T. Bassett, understood her dismissal to be "the result of calling attention to this carnage."[91] And the faculty directors of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies were forced out in March 2025 in a move MESA called "an egregious violation of longstanding and widely accepted norms of faculty governance as well as the principles of academic freedom."[92]

Case Study: Cleared but Denied Tenure

Jairo Fúnez-Flores, an assistant professor at Texas Tech, a public university in Lubbock, Texas, faced converging harassment by outside agitators and university administrators, as well as external pressure from the Texas governor and possibly from board members and a university alumnus. His denial of tenure by the president, after positive reviews by his academic colleagues, was in effect a political purge.

Fúnez-Flores, who also has written about receiving "hate emails, voicemails, and death threats" from people objecting to his social media posts in support of Palestinian rights received a letter in his mailbox at his office that read: "whatever horrible things might happen to befall you, you would richly deserve with your announced support of Hamas terrorism." He observed, "My university never offered support, even though administrators were aware of the threats I had received. My safety was not a concern."[93]

In his interview with us, he described how he was asked to submit his syllabi for extraordinary review by the dean after administrators received complaints about his social media posts. He was then targeted by Texas Scorecard, a far-right media outlet which made a Freedom of Information Act request for his communications and teaching materials and published an article about him.[94] When Fúnez-Flores' dean asked him to delete a tweet about this hit piece, it was clear that administrators were trying to avoid negative public attention.

The university's Board of Regents is appointed by the Texas governor, Greg Abbott at the time, and that Board wields power over the university president. Abbott signed Executive Order GA-44, which asked institutions to revise free speech policies, take action against pro-Palestine groups and individuals, and enforce the state-adopted IHRA definition that ideologically conflates criticism of Israel with antisemitism.[95] Abbot's donor networks include evangelical Christian Tim Dunn, a Texas Tech alumnus who also

financially supports Texas Scorecard and other far-right education reform efforts, and who chairs the Christian Advisory Board of the Israel Allies Foundation (IAF).[96] It is not unreasonable to assume that external political and donor pressure influenced the university administration.

Abbott issued Executive Order GA-44 in March 2024. That same month, Fúnez-Flores was suspended and the President and Chancellor publicly excoriated his social media posts as "hateful, antisemitic, and unacceptable" before any investigation began. Around a month later, the Office of Equal Opportunity found Fúnez-Flores not guilty, since there was no evidence of discriminatory harassment in the work and classroom environment based on race and religion, and he was reinstated. The President and Chancellor then issued another public statement to Texas Tech faculty and local media deploring Fúnez-Flores' posts as antisemitic.

Despite support for his tenure promotion from a significant majority of faculty voting at departmental and college levels, and support from the provost and a tenure hearing panel, the president denied his tenure in February 2026.[97]

Stay in Your (Narrow) Lane - Accusations of Pedagogical Misconduct

Administrators have fired or otherwise penalized instructors for teaching material they deemed inappropriately political. Both non-tenured instructors and tenured/tenure-track professors were disciplined on these grounds. Six of our interviewees were accused of teaching about Palestine in ways unconnected to the class subject. In every case, the employee knew that their teaching was pedagogically appropriate, and that their censure stemmed from a conflict over political viewpoint with a supervisor. The pretext of pedagogy shrouds the university's illegitimate retaliatory actions with claims about professional norms or policies. The definition of academic freedom in the 1940 AAUP Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure asserted that "teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject." A 1970 comment, which highlights the "the need for teachers to avoid persistently intruding material which has no relation to their subject," cautions that the "intent of this statement is not to discourage what is controversial'" since controversy "is at the heart of the free academic inquiry."[98] Despite these nuances, university administrators often use restricted definitions of faculty's fields to target them.

Case Study: "Professional Expectations" or Political?

A non-tenured assistant professor, Dr. Wen Feng (they/them), filed an official complaint with the Labor Commissioner's Office in California alleging that Stanford wrongfully terminated their employment. Dr. Feng was fired in April 2025 for "failure to meet performance and professional expectations." According to the complaint, the allegations against the academic content of Dr. Feng's course followed their political activism on campus and were vague and unsupported by objective evidence.

Prior to the termination, Feng alleges that a senior administrator objected to an event focused on Palestine that Dr. Feng was co-leading. After this incident, Dr. Feng's supervisor warned them to avoid participating in anything that could be perceived as political.

Two weeks later, Dr. Feng hosted a guest lecturer in their class, Dr. Rupa Marya of UCSF Medical School, who spoke about Palestine, drawing on her research on the health impacts of racism. In Dr. Feng's assessment, Dr. Marya's lecture was consistent with the content previously included in the course curriculum and aligned with Dr. Feng's submitted syllabus. A week later, Dr. Feng alleges that they were informed that administrators, faculty, and students had raised concerns about Dr. Marya, whom Dr. Feng's supervisor and chair deemed "controversial," referencing concerns about her public advocacy for Palestine. Six weeks later, Dr. Feng received a letter informing them that their course content would henceforth be subject to prior review by another faculty member.

Dr. Feng's Labor Commissioner complaint letter states:

> Stanford never identified any policy, curricular requirement, or course objective that the lecture purportedly

> violated, nor did it point to any specific element of content that was inaccurate, inappropriate, or irrelevant. . . . Stanford cited this "inappropriate" lecture as justification for Dr. Feng's termination. However, the only "controversial" aspect identified was Dr. Marya's public association with a cause Stanford apparently disfavored.

Regarding the complaint's account of Stanford's response to Dr. Feng's activities and teaching about Palestine, including alleged disapproval from a senior administrator, the letter further states:

> [Stanford officials'] refusal to provide any substantive explanation of alleged complaints, combined with the fact that similar subject matter had been taught by prior instructors without issue, underscores that the purported curricular objection was pretextual.[99]

Case Study: Vindicated but Not Rehired - A Contingent Worker Asserts Her Academic Freedom

"Mary,"[100] a contingent instructor teaching for the first time at a large private research university, was terminated in early May 2024 because she included an optional assignment on Palestine.

Teaching a course in a health field, Mary offered extensions as well as an optional assignment related directly to both her course material and Gaza. "I had a lot of black and brown students and a lot of students who identified as Muslim," she said, and she wanted to enable them "to still be a participant in class and still be actively engaged in academic learning." A self-identified Jewish student who had received extensions for religious holidays asked if the offered extensions were for people involved in the encampment and Mary clarified that the flexibility was available for all students. Soon after, the department chair asked Mary why she had offered the time flexibility to her class and why she used the word genocide. A dean then emailed the department, instructing teachers to remain on their normal schedules despite the encampment. Mary understood this as an academic freedom violation: "You actually can't tell professors that they can't give students extra time. There's no rule about that." A screenshot of Mary's email offering extra time then appeared on social media, leading to threatening emails sent to Mary, doxxing, and social media posts against her. Soon after, Mary was informed she was being terminated "for not performing… satisfactorily" because she allegedly introduced an assignment "unrelated to the course objectives and microbiology" and for introducing "political matters" into the course.

With a keen sense of justice and an understanding of the importance of academic freedom principles, Mary took steps to fight back: she found allies, read the faculty handbook, and tried to get ahead of the public narrative about her situation. Luckily, she had archived important communication she'd had with her supervisors, which would prove crucial in her vindication.

After receiving an email from someone she told us that she later discovered was affiliated with AIPAC, Mary felt threatened and decided she needed "to be more open about [what was happening] publicly before someone else gets to tell the story that they don't even know." A friend connected her with a politically aligned pro bono lawyer, who connected her with the Faculty for Justice in Palestine (FJP) chapter. FJP members helped her understand her rights as laid out in the faculty handbook.

Following legal advice, Mary sent an email giving the administration a chance to undo their mistake and avoid an appeal. When they didn't respond, she quickly filed the appeal, using the records Mary had kept of key correspondence. She was summoned to an interview with the appeals board whose members asked questions revealing their ignorance of the political context surrounding the encampment and Palestine. Mary said she found the questioners to be "neutral and not necessarily hostile," while one seemed actively sympathetic to those opposing a genocide.

The appeals board ruled in Mary's favor, stating that her dismissal violated academic freedom and citing the email exchange in which the chair gave Mary permission to run her course as she saw fit. Mary believed that they understood she had been fired for political reasons without acknowledging it. The decision was confirmed by the dean three days before the end of the semester, but Mary was not rehired.

Accuse Them of Violence - Hyping Up Fear

The definitions of harm, violence, and danger have been politically manipulated to encompass certain kinds of expression about Palestine and Israel. Students, faculty, and outside actors have accused non-violent pro-Palestine employees of being "dangerous" and "a threat" for their political speech, triggering institutional disciplinary actions. University administrators have mobilized the language of "security" and violence in ways devised to justify the outcomes of disciplinary procedures. In every case of this kind that we documented, evidence indicates that the accusations were fabricated or based on ideologically motivated misrepresentations.

University presidents played a significant role in circulating unproven allegations against employees. Faculty members at Washington University who were suspended after attending a student demonstration in 2024 described how the university falsely portrayed the student encampment as violent. One suggested that accusations of violence were part of "the narrative that the university constructed after the fact … to exonerate themselves from this terrible overreaction [of calling in a large contingent of police and the arrest of 123 people]." It was, she said, an attempt to publicly validate their actions: "They claim that it was violent, that we were using the sticks that held the signs in a threatening way. They claimed that students in the Olin Library were forced to hide under their desk in fear and they called 9-1-1. Absolutely fabricated. Every level of the administration closed ranks around a particular narrative about what happened."[101] Another faculty member who was arrested that day described the administration's description of events as "Orwellian," "dishonest," and "overt lying": "There were little kids out there. There were no threats of violence. They said that the protesters entered the library. Nobody ever entered the library. There were no anti-Semitic chants. There was nothing. The most outrageous part was the distortion."[102]

In some instances, university presidents or other influential figures described those opposing Israel's actions and Zionism as terrorists and Hamas supporters, which has dangerous consequences for individuals and campuses. George Washington University president, Ellen M. Granberg, characterized conduct surrounding an SJP vigil as a "celebration of terrorism."[103]

Portland State University president Ann Cudd issued a joint statement with the President of the Associated Students of Portland State University condemning "hateful rhetoric" and associated it with student activists.[104] A faculty member believed these and similar statements chilled speech by repeatedly condemning "violent, hateful speech" without specifying what was violent and hateful.[105]

Had there been serious threats, it is likely that universities would have acted more seriously to contain them.

Send 'Security,' Whether they Like it Or Not

Exaggeration and political rhetoric also contributed to ideologically skewed representations of campuses as unsafe and as potentially violent because of Palestine advocacy. For instance, when Emerson College staff member, Anna Feder, was told she'd have to have armed police in the theatre if she screened *Israelism,* she understood that the administration was contending that "this screening was somehow a threat. Everything was framed around security." She suggested that if their concern was about disruptions caused by people outside the institution, then she could limit the event to college members. But even that wasn't acceptable to them. Pointing to the unreasonable and unlikely implications, she said, "So you think that there's going to be fist fights between students over this film?" Reality undercut the university's securitized narrative: when the film was eventually screened some months later, the audience was large, appreciative, and peaceful.[106]

These cases show how university administrators are, as one faculty member said, "creating a climate of fear." They continued, "And it's supposedly in the name of safety. But it's a very skilfully constructed and effective way to shut down protest. Deploying police, acting as if a peaceful protest is dangerous."[107]

"Everybody's a Gargoyle" - Damage Colleague Trust and Atomize Employees

Retaliation against employees destroyed trust in institutions and colleagues, as reported by many interviewees who described feeling betrayed. A professor who challenged his suspension after a spurious Title VI complaint found that "going through the peer committee [investigating his challenge] was the hardest thing of the whole process." He explained, "They were supposed to be critical people in a critical faculty… but they accepted accounts handed down from above and asked stupid questions," which made him extremely uncomfortable around them. As a long-time activist, he had not expected any better behavior from administrators, but such treatment from peers "took a toll" and plunged him "into a kind of depression." "If it's your peers, then you're like, 'Oh damn, this means everybody's a gargoyle.'"[108]

Strikingly, tenured faculty were least likely to provide moral or material support or speak up for targeted employees. Many interviewees remarked on their hypocrisy and what one called "abject cowardice." They assessed that it was people's belief in their own vulnerability or fear of losing status or benefits that led most to stay quiet in the face of the university's retaliatory behavior. One person described this as a "Palestine blind spot" among faculty: "They often have incredibly progressive views, personally. And they might even hold those views in their teaching, but then when it comes to actually taking action or putting those two things in alignment, I think they often err on the side of safety."[109]

Interviewees were also critical of colleagues and supervisors who recognized the injustice of the university's actions but only offered moral support in private, saying nothing in public and taking no actions to offer practical support. Worse, in the view of our interviewees, some supervisors privately presented themselves as being supportive, but then punished the employee anyway. Notably, pre-tenure faculty and students were more likely to provide support, despite being in a more precarious position than their tenured colleagues. As interviewees' testimonies and several reports on the state of academic freedom these days attest, fear and self-censorship are rampant.[110]

No Reason Is the Best Reason - No Cause Terminations

Employers had no obligation to explain to employees on temporary contracts without a union why they were being fired. But usually, the sequence of events made clear to the targeted employees that their termination was related to their Palestine pedagogy or advocacy.

A non-unionized staff member at a university student center was given a "no-cause termination," which they understood to be the result of multiple influences and incidents. A student had complained about a coloring book in the children's play area of the center that included a page showing a woman wearing a kuffiya with olive branches and text that read "from the river to the sea." The complaint was that this page was calling for the annihilation of all Jews. The staff member was advised by their director to remove anything that could possibly make any student feel unwelcome. The staff member objected, explaining that the feminist framework of their work itself could make anti-feminist students feel unwelcome. Not long after, the staff at the student center where this employee worked issued a public statement critical of the university's decision to deploy riot police against students in a pro-Palestine encampment. The director objected to the statement and soon after, the staff member was fired with no explanation. They have since left academia.[111]

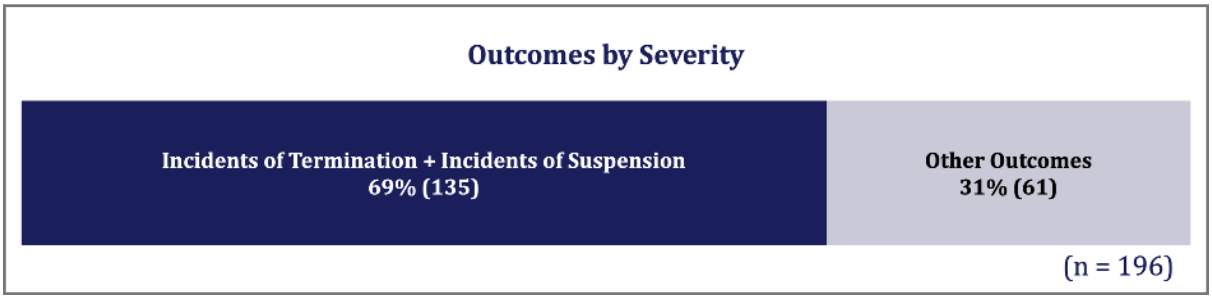
Supervisors often work to ensure that employees cannot prove that a decision to fire, not hire, or otherwise punish them was due to their Palestine pedagogy or criticism of Israel. In five cases, our interviewees had strong reason to believe their appointments or promotions were blocked by a high-level administrator due to politics, though they were never told this directly. The timing of events added to their assessments, as they were denied tenure or appointment by people they knew opposed their pro-Palestine politics soon after their Palestine advocacy became more public.

Personal and Professional Effects: Individual Pain, Collective Purge, and a Rippling Chill

Loss of Income and Health Care

Damage of many kinds—financial, career, reputational, emotional, and psychological—was reported by every interviewee.

Termination, including under the guise of "layoffs" or "non-rehiring," was the most consequential and overt form of adverse action taken by employers. Beyond the immediate loss of income, those affected—people terminated, not re-hired, removed from a position, suspended without pay, denied tenure or promotion—described significant effects on their housing, healthcare access, long-term financial security, and future employment prospects. One interviewee had to sell her home after losing her position and being unable to secure new employment—which she believes was due to being blacklisted in academia after speaking openly about Palestine and her employer's actions.[112] Even without termination, financial penalization occurred through suspension without pay or denial of a pay raise. Almost half (49%) of the 196 cases documented by AFI included financial ramifications for those targeted.[113]



In the United States, job loss often means loss of access to affordable healthcare. For some interviewees, losing coverage was as significant a concern as losing wages. In this context, decisions by universities to withdraw healthcare benefits during disciplinary proceedings carried serious consequences. University of California, Irvine, Chancellor Howard Gillman suspended Prof. Tiffany Willoughby-Herard's healthcare benefits despite an Academic Senate committee recommendation that she retain faculty rights and privileges during her suspension. Colleagues' mutual aid request for her described the decision as "draconian and unwarranted," increasing her precarity when she needed health care to treat injuries from a brutal arrest by police on campus.

Stigma that Sticks

Many interviewees discussed the stigmatizing effects of investigations. One targeted employee summarized their situation, which was typical, in an affidavit: "Even if the investigation's outcome were later reversed through legal action, the damage to my career—including the irreparable harm to my professional reputation, the loss of income during this prolonged process, and the enduring stigma of being publicly associated with baseless allegations—would persist indefinitely."[114] Regardless of how outlandish an accusation and regardless of the outcome, a mere accusation caused suffering. Employees feared that university presidents' communications and social media representations associating them with antisemitism, terrorism, and hate, would damage their professional and personal reputations.

Such reputational damage impacted employees' professional trajectories, placing a ceiling on their careers. Post-graduate applications at some schools ask applicants if they've ever had a conduct review or been investigated. Faculty members report being removed from committees and career development programs, and fearing that they will be overlooked for future professional development opportunities.

Employees who were suspended and banned from campus (forty-nine cases in the AFI database as of August 20, 2026) were often described by administrators as dangerous in ways the employees felt were both inaccurate and damaging. The language used in the suspension of a professor after his arrest while acting as a witness at an encampment described "behavior that was highly disruptive and compromised the safety of the campus community." It was, he said, "the language that they use for sexual predators who get suspended."[115]

"Every morning I come to my office, and I put my key in the door. I wonder if it's going to work. Did they change the lock? Did they fire me and not tell me?"

Several interviewees, including some who were not suspended, described feeling socially ostracized, shunned, and isolated, and that their departments felt hostile and unwelcoming. A graduate student reported that "colleagues, advisors, and academic collaborators have distanced themselves due to the stigma of being publicly linked to an investigation." Highlighting the emotional impact of disciplinary processes and stigmatization, several interviewees broke down in tears during our conversation.

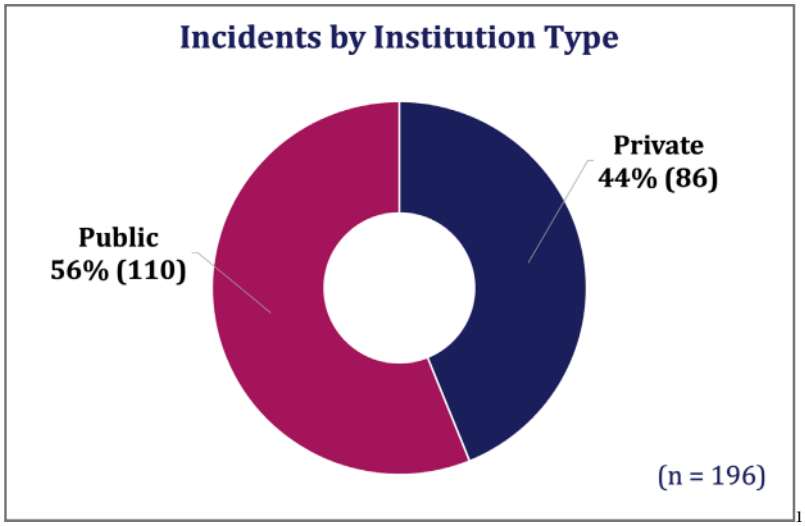
Endless Repercussions

For employees who were already dealing with a hostile work environment—due to racism, anti-Muslim bias, or other kinds of persecution—facing employer retaliation related to Palestine tested their endurance. No matter the outcome of a case, employees feared and sometimes experienced long-term repercussions. A professor described experiencing "a sustained pattern of discrimination, retaliation, and hostile treatment" by her supervisor for years before being accused of antisemitism and investigated because of an Arabic poster on her office door. She explained:

> Every week I had to fear what was going to come. Because it had been years already of such practices. So [the investigation] was an additional one. It just became an accumulation of… How are they going to cut my legs this time? … It took so much away from the work that I was doing because my energy was going into anxiety about how they were going to treat me, how they were going to abuse me again. Rather than doing the work and moving forward and focusing on doing good… I was definitely traumatized by it.[116]

Her stress was compounded by her status as a tenure-track employee on a work visa. The increasingly aggressive ICE kidnappings of non-citizens amplified her fear. She worried about the consequences of losing her job:

> Without my work visa, then I don't have a status in the country. I have two kids here and a [non-citizen] husband. I would have risked my [legal] status. I would have lost, obviously, money to pay for my kids' schools, to just survive. I would have had to leave the country for at least a year until, you know, the new cycle of academic posts were being advertised.



[117]

A professor at a public university who was arrested and suspended continues to feel uneasy at his workplace:

> Every morning I come to my office, and I put my key in the door. I wonder if it's going to work. Did they change the lock? Did they fire me and not tell me? I don't feel safe at this university. I think that if the president decided one morning, "We must fire him," straight down the line, all the way to my chair, they would say, "Okay," and they would just… I don't feel that there is even one level or layer that would try to stop them from firing me. It's tough to meet with my chair, and the people you work with on a daily basis when you realize that they're not the allies you thought they were.[118]

His description of his mindset illustrates how long-lasting and deep the effects of employer retaliation can be on employees.

Psychological Effects: Fear and Isolation

Anxiety, stress, and other negative mental health impacts were also common. Several interviewees felt unsafe on campus or feared for the safety of their children and stopped bringing them to campus. Others were afraid to be in public after being doxxed and identified in campaigns against them. An instructor who saw that online bullies had posted her photo and were searching for her address began changing clothes after appearing at campus rallies to evade possible assailants.[119] Although most did not describe their employers as the direct source of their physical fear, the intimidating atmosphere that university decisions produced on campus and in the public domain contributed to their concerns.

Many mentioned feeling depressed. A professor who left a university after being investigated for pro-Palestine expression said, "I experienced the most stress I've ever experienced in my life. And in fact, I experienced the only depression I've experienced in my life."[120]

Several employees conveyed how difficult it was to manage the stress of being targeted while continuing Palestine solidarity work and feeling depleted from witnessing the genocide. They spoke of feeling humiliated by the accusations against them, the investigation process, and the experience of being treated with suspicion and disrespect. A graduate student who endured a long investigation explained:

> It was very, very depressing. It was a humiliating process to begin with, to be accused of something like this [antisemitism]. At the end of the investigation there was the threat of termination. It was very depressing and humiliating. Because you're being accused of something that's quite foul. It was just very unsettling. And then of course the trauma of witnessing the genocide is already terrible. I don't even know how to put words to it. But encountering people who are maliciously attacking you because you're opposed to something that's quite malicious. It's a very weird and disturbing inversion.[121]

The psychological impact of harassment and punishment was often severe enough to require medical care, and several interviewees sought professional help due to their experiences. Others described sleep disturbances, an inability to focus, and strain on personal relationships. A staff member investigated by a hostile investigator described his experience as "deeply traumatic." He complained that he "needed ongoing, and expensive, psychiatric treatment and medical care to cope with the abuse."[122] The harms that targeted employees experienced served to warn others that engaging in political expression carried significant and potentially life-changing risks.

The Chill of Self-Censorship

MESA's research echoes the findings of UN Special Rapporteurs on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression: universities' repressive measures have "created a chilling effect on the whole academic community and a climate of intimidation" and "many scholars believe that the measures, on-campus and off-campus, have produced a 'culture of intimidation' and had a chilling effect on public discourse, academic research and policy expertise on Middle East issues."[123] A survey by Yale's AAUP chapter and a 2025 Middle East

Scholar Barometer survey confirm very high rates of self-censorship among faculty when they speak professionally about Palestine.[124] Our interviewees likewise recounted the chilling effects of workplace crackdowns, leading employees at all levels to teach and talk less, or not at all, about Palestine. A tenured professor at a state university was unequivocal:

> The thing that has happened here utterly and completely is self-censorship. Everybody has started to be cautious and be silenced, and we're sort of isolated from each other… the levels of self-censorship that we are learning are becoming second nature, [we are learning] to become a faculty that doesn't stir in the faculty meeting when this is mentioned… I don't blame at all those who are not tenured, but it behoves those with tenure to stir, you know?[125]

This social abandonment of targeted colleagues has had social, professional, and political effects, including a loss of confidence and commitment among employees at all levels.

The Purge

The professor who looked upon his colleagues as gargoyles has since accepted an early retirement deal from his university, as have others we've interviewed. Several interviewees who were terminated have left academia, finding work in other fields. They commented that in the current climate, they believed themselves blacklisted and have little hope of finding a job in higher ed. Others shifted careers after growing disillusioned with academe as a result of the retaliatory treatment. A former contingent instructor said that her experience "definitely made me question academia as a career because I loved teaching itself, but it also showed me how much we don't support professors as a whole."[126] While the number of cases resulting in termination and early retirement recorded by MESA is small relative to all higher education employees, the dynamics that pushed people out of academia suggest that a purge of pro-Palestine academics and other employees willing to speak out on Palestine has begun.

Resistance & Solidarity: Lessons Learned About Fighting Back for Academic Freedom

The methods deployed against pro-Palestine employees made fighting back challenging. Standing up for one's rights to free expression and academic freedom in the face of networked campaigns, pretexts, obscure language, and misrepresentations—whether by people and organizations in the shadows of the internet or those in visible positions of power—required courage and community. But self-censorship and fear, combined with the large number of cases that strained limited resources of energy, time, and emotional bandwidth left many targeted employees struggling to find support. Nevertheless, targeted employees found allies and supporters, marshalled their resources, and stood up to their persecutors. Based on the cases of interviewees and other employees' experiences, this section provides a compilation of lessons learned about resisting repression.

Create a Paper Trail

Keeping a record of both institutional communications and any unusual campus or classroom interactions is good practice whether or not a person has been targeted. If something happens that you are concerned could lead to being targeted, write it down or email a description of what took place to yourself and/or a trusted ally. If you have been targeted, download and store emails, screenshots of social media, and other documents related to your case. Also document verbal communications and meetings with administrators or anyone else related to your case; one way to do this is to use a non-university email to send yourself and a trusted colleague a record immediately afterwards, to preserve the time/date stamp of the event.

Do Your Homework

Learn about academic freedom principles and how they apply to your situation. Read your faculty handbook to understand both your rights and institutional processes. Conduct a realistic risk assessment, taking into consideration factors such as your employee status (tenured, contingent, etc.), your citizenship status, and your position within your department and among colleagues.

Join a Union

Unionized employees fared better than others, often receiving advice, legal assistance, and support, such as union representatives accompanying employees at hearings. Those without such benefits reached out to civil society organizations, such as Palestine Legal and CAIR, which were overtaxed and sometimes unable to take on new cases. Some found politically aligned lawyers through social and activist circles. While some interviewees had to pay out of pocket, many attorneys committed to social justice work provide their services pro bono or at reduced cost. Building and growing unions, in part through incorporating contingent labor in them, increases the chance that the union can sway university administrators.

Contact Palestine Legal

Palestine Legal is a good resource for direct support and referrals to trusted attorneys.

Power Map the Institution

Building an understanding of where influence lies at an institution and how to access it helps people build a more efficient campaign. This may start with learning about your governing board or regents, as this guide explains.[127]

Make Use of Tenure

The evidence shows that union members and tenured faculty have job protections. Even if tenure is being undercut by states implementing post-tenure review, it still stands as a safeguard of academic freedom. Be realistic about your risk assessments.

Find Allies and Supporters

Don't wait until being targeted to find allies on campus, whether reaching out to individuals you trust or by joining your campus AAUP chapter or other relevant faculty organizations. Given the role of social ostracism in the retaliatory machine, it is not surprising that interviewees emphasized how much they benefited from being in community with others facing similar challenges. It reduced their sense of isolation and of being gaslit. If relevant to your field, join MESA as well.

Coordinate Diverse Strengths

Defence against attacks is most effective when organizations are strong and there is active solidarity among different constituencies, before a retaliatory campaign gets underway. See AAUP's primer, *How to Organize Around Issues and Build Faculty Power.*[128] MESA and other organizations often provide letters that can demonstrate widespread faculty and organizational support for your case to administrators, pressure them to uphold academic freedom, and circulate information about your case.[129]

Speak in Tandem with Grassroots, Public Pressure

Coordinating messages and efforts among campus organizations with related public pressure increases the reach and efficacy of resistance campaigns.

FOIA for Information

Although governments everywhere are making it harder for citizens to access information about how government agencies and public bodies function, lessons in how to access evidence and records relevant to a case in the US are available here and here.[130]

Record and Manage Online Harassment

PEN America's Online Harassment Field Manual and its article about a George Mason professor who writes about heteropatriarchy provide tips for how to protect yourself and your family and mobilize your university to do things to help keep you safe from harassment.[131]

Refuse Silencing: Continue to Teach about Palestine

Despite the understandable fear and widespread belief that staying quiet is the way to avoid being persecuted, in practice, continuing to speak out and teach about Palestine is the main way to resist the institutions and individuals targeting employees and to prevent them from intimidating and censoring others.

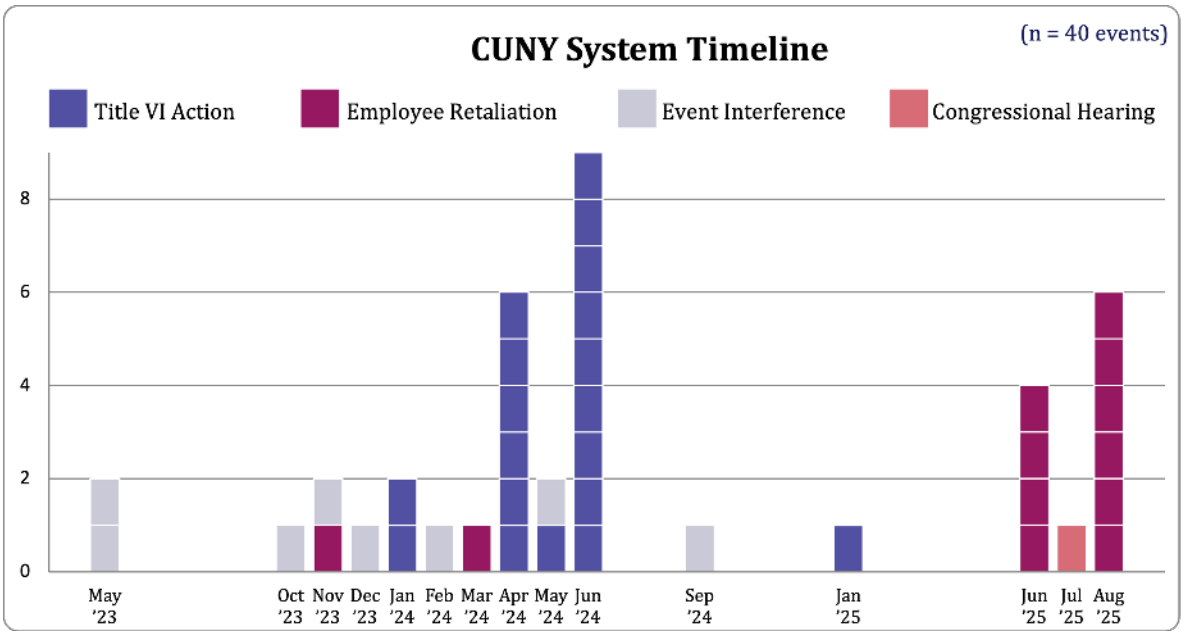
A Case Study: CUNY's Grassroots

In January 2026, there was an important, although still incomplete, victory at the City University of New York (CUNY), where three of four contingent instructors who were fired—three were "non-reappointed" and one terminated after participating in a pro-Palestine demonstration—have been rehired.[132] The case of "the Fired Four" reflected the university's distinct profile; local, state, and national political climate; and intra-campus community relations. CUNY's standing as an esteemed institution, public support from progressive politicians, and the targeted employees' union and activist networks contributed to this victory. Despite the ongoing persecution of the person now referred to as "the Fired Fourth," CUNY offers instruction and inspiration for faculty and staff elsewhere trying to protect their academic freedom and rights to speak out and teach about Palestine.

Its campaign demonstrates the importance of building and growing unions and incorporating contingent labor in them. Unions can sway university administrators when they speak in tandem with grassroots, public pressure. A professor involved in CUNY organizing also noted that "the more direct the political message about Palestine was, the more powerful the movement became. The union's power increased when its leadership became more willing to say directly that our members were being punished for speech related to Palestine and, more explicitly, for standing

against the genocide."

"The Fired Four" lost their jobs in mid-June 2025, one month before CUNY chancellor Félix V. Matos Rodríguez's congressional grilling about a year after CUNY's voluntary settlement with the OCR under Biden. The settlement increased government surveillance over the university and chilled speech on Palestine.[133] In this period, CUNY also rounded up a member of staff and five faculty members ("The Singed Six") for disciplinary measures. (See the institutional timeline on the AFI website here.[134])



Rodríguez's responses at the hearing of the U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce drew widespread outrage. When Florida Republican Randy Fine asked about contingent instructor Corinna Mullin's anti-Zionist speech and support of Palestinian rights, Rodríguez confirmed that Mullin was no longer employed at CUNY and averred that calls for violence and support for Hamas were unacceptable.[135] In doing so, he redefined criticism of Israel and support of Palestinian rights as terrorism outside the bounds of legitimate political discourse. The union denounced Rodríguez's response as capitulation to MAGA Republicans and criticized the "cynical attempt to use real anxiety about rising antisemitism to ambush university leaders, smear faculty, slash funding, and delegitimize institutions that are essential for a working democracy."[136] The government's attempt to bully teachers and purge the university was particularly egregious given the anti-communist political repression of faculty, staff, and students at CUNY during the "Red Scare" from the 1930s through the 1960s.

Around a year later, when CUNY administration fired the contingent instructors, a vibrant campaign demanding their rehiring emerged. Long brewing faculty discontent with management created the conditions for people to rally around "the Fired Four." A union member explained that "enough forms of repression had happened, and the genocide had been going on for almost two years, for there to be a realization that this was a fight that had to be taken on."

Three CUNY organizations formed the basis of the campaign: the union, known as the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the PSC Academic Freedom Committee, and the Faculty for Justice in Palestine (FSJP) chapter. The size and strength of the union mattered. The PSC represents 30,000 faculty and staff, and its chapter at Brooklyn College, where the Fired Four had worked, was especially strong, according to one member, "because they've done a lot of grassroots organizing, including with adjuncts who generally don't join the union."

The union immediately filed a grievance and its Academic Freedom Committee mobilized. Because academic freedom is contractually protected, CUNY employees can fight academic freedom violations. The Committee did more than write letters of complaint, it also offered support and advice. "We made it clear that if you were a vulnerable

faculty member who was facing the kind of situation you described, you can come and talk to us about it and it'll be completely confidential."

CUNY's Faculty and Students for Justice in Palestine (FSJP) chapter is one of the largest nationally, with some 150 members playing an important role. While overlap exists between FSJP and union membership, as an organization committed to Palestine and BDS, FSJP organizing centered the genocide. An FSJP member and union activist described the union leadership's unwillingness to speak directly about Palestine, having been sued by Zionist faculty in the past. But as FSJP, she said, "We could be much more forthright, saying this is outrageous that they're punishing students for protesting a genocide." FSJP was therefore "really clear" that this was not only an academic freedom or contract violation, but also punishment for speaking about Palestine.

Each of these groups organized large public rallies. City politicians participated, including Alexa Avilés, New York City Council member from Brooklyn and Brad Lander, New York's Comptroller. Zohran Mamdani backed the Fired Four during a campaign event at Brooklyn College.[137] Over time, the movement to reinstate the Fired Four gained "a quasi-national profile," with calls to reappoint them from national associations, including MESA, and participation from other academic groups, including NYU's AAUP chapter.[138] And the Fired Four themselves were active, successfully attracting public support from high profile city politicians, public intellectuals, and community activists.[139]

Although the work was exhausting for those leading the campaign, and people feel frustrated at having to work defensively "instead of thinking about the future and the positive demands," one union leader highlighted the struggle's positive effects. Her "adjunct colleagues didn't expect us to throw down as hard as we did for them. It created more unity," she said. Work remains to help workers understand that everyone is threatened when political speech about Palestine is punished, and the intensified solidarity among union and Palestine activists is a step towards that. CUNY demonstrates the motivating power of a politically conscious workforce that knows its value and has no illusions about what administrators will do to quash protest.[140]

Resources Lacking

The intensity and speed with which the retaliatory winds swept across higher education left individuals and organizations underprepared for what was happening. Those targeted saw, in hindsight, what could have been helpful for managing the attacks. Our interviewees' wish list included material resources, moral support and public backing, institutional knowledge, and structural change.

A staff member who was fired explained that targeted people need help applying for unemployment and ways to make money. Noting that individuals were left to seek support through personal fundraisers, she wished there was an organized mutual aid fund. Others who were fired or suspended spoke of the need for resources to pay for legal help and basic survival needs. As Dominique J. Baker argued in an essay advocating for mutual aid funds to "restructure our environment to make it easier for faculty and staff to participate in collective action," empowering higher ed workers to exercise their First Amendment rights generally is "a critical first step to being able to rebalance power distribution."[141] Mutual aid funds would not only support those facing repression, they could also encourage more people to engage publicly and make them less fearful that speaking out could leave them destitute.

Some mentioned their wish for greater faculty support and for protections in their union contract. A staff person wished she had known she was eligible to join the AAUP. People also needed support in understanding university policies. One wished for a portal for reporting what was happening to them, with resources about actions to take. Another called for "racism-focused intervention, bystander intervention training, and administrative accountability capable of addressing the race- and gender-based attacks."

Many interviewees commented on the need for more politically aligned lawyers available to support such cases. One noted that their lawyer counselled caution when she would have preferred to fight back:

> I think if I had had a lawyer who was actually in the movement and believed in the movement, I think that could have been really helpful. Because there were so many times that it was just me pushing back on my own against the university. And I know they would have responded differently to a lawyer. And this person

that I had just wasn't going to do that for me.[142]

A professor who believed that his local AAUP chapter was biased and had not followed clear standards of conduct for the defence of academic freedom wished that it had done its work. Another wished that professional associations of which he was a member had written letters to his administration like MESA had.

And some rightly noted that the only solution was fundamental structural change to the ways universities are run. An employee suggested that shared governance, growing the unions that exist, and unionizing people who are not unionized are the best ways to lessen the brunt of the administrative tyranny. "There needs to be power building within the university."[143]

Appendix 1

Methods and Respondents

This report is based on MESA's Academic Freedom Initiative database of employer retaliation, the first of its kind tracking higher education's punitive treatment of employees of higher education institutions in the US and Canada speaking out on Palestine since October 7, 2023.[144] It also draws heavily on in-depth interviews with 31 employees of higher education institutions in the US and Canada. (The code numbers of interviews cited in this report do not accord with the AFI database unique identifiers.) The interviews, conducted remotely by Zoom between March and July 2026, were undertaken in an ethnographic spirit with the goal of understanding not only objective facts and patterns characterizing the retaliatory dynamics within higher education, but also the interviewees' analyses, understandings, and subjective experiences of being part of this moment of intensified repression of academic freedom and free speech.

Some people who have been targeted in this wave of repression were forced to retreat to protect their jobs, families, and mental health, but no one fully succumbed to pressure. By speaking up and letting their stories be heard, our interviewees have contributed to a project of truth-telling, a means to resist propaganda and injustice.

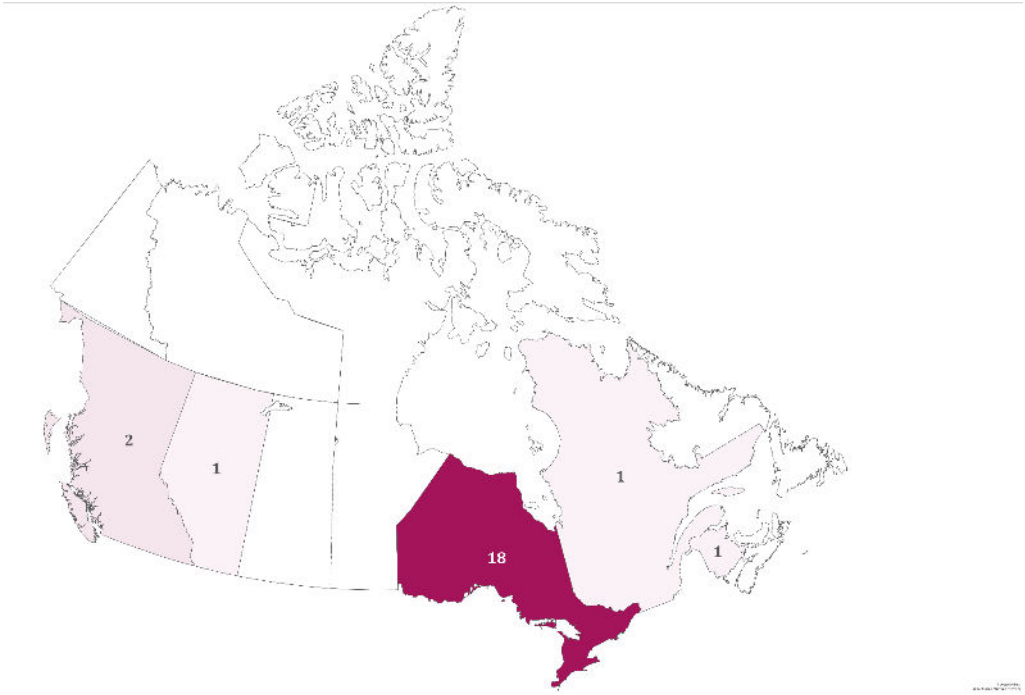
Interviewees included tenured and tenure-track faculty, staff members in university administration and educational programs, non-tenure-track and contingent faculty, and student employees from a variety of backgrounds at diverse types of institutions throughout the US and Canada. We talked with people in the humanities and social sciences, as well as those in the health sciences. This report maintains the anonymity of most interviewees (excepting those who gave permission or preferred to be named) and other people involved in their cases to protect them from additional retaliation from their employers and from possible blowback from parties off campus. The majority of cases discussed in this report occurred in 2024 and 2025, but the dynamics producing this retaliation are still active: the investigation and punishment of many employees remain underway or unresolved, and new incidents are still occurring.

While our interviewees and people whose cases are recorded in the AFI database have suffered a range of repercussions, there are likely to be other kinds of situations experienced by people that our interviews did not cover. We invite readers working in higher education who have faced retaliation by their employer for speaking out on Palestine since October 2023 and do not see their case reflected in the AFI database to get in touch through the AFI website contact page.

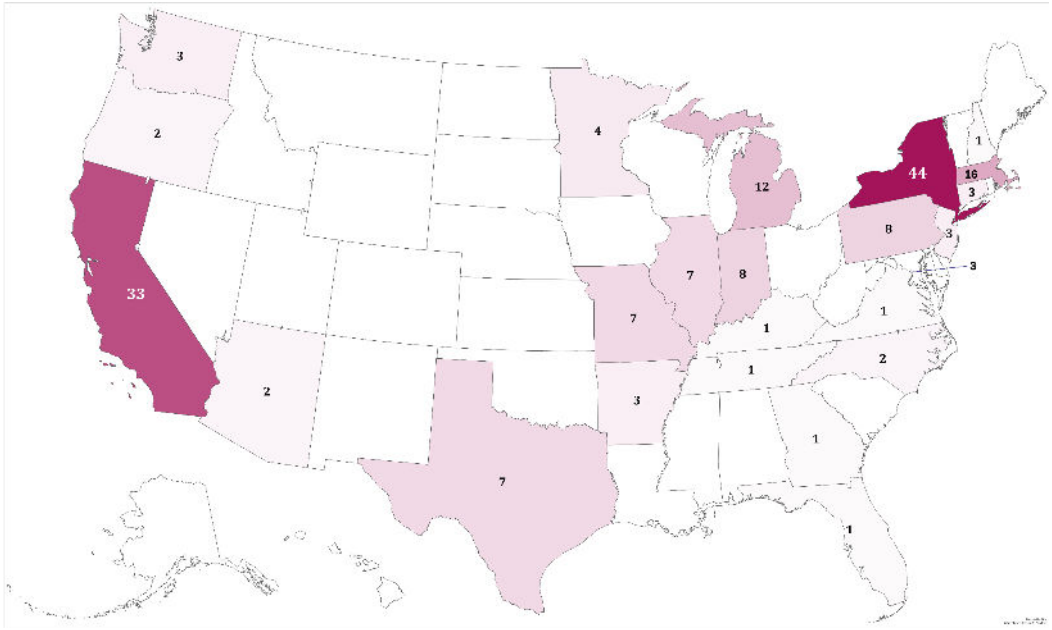
This report is confined to cases occurring in the United States and Canada, in line with MESA's remit. However, the anti-Palestine backlash against educators and others in higher education is a worldwide phenomenon—as reports on the UK and EU countries attest—and the North American cases analyzed here should be understood as part of a global dynamic in which governments and other powers seek to grow their centralized, anti-democratic control of higher education.[145]

Appendix 2

Incidents by Province/Territory - Canada



Incidents by State - USA



Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Lori Allen, research coordinator of MESA's Academic Freedom Initiative, with data analysis assistance from Saliem Shehadeh. It was reviewed by Lara Deeb and Darryl Li, co-chairs of MESA's Task Force on Civil and Human Rights; Jeffrey Reger, executive director of MESA; and Ussama Makdisi, president of MESA. Thanks to Sara Palmer and Saliem Shehadeh for design assistance, and to Radhika Sainath and Jonah Rubin for their comments and suggestions.

Cover image: "Why can't you say Palestine?" by BoasHurstonFreyreSaid, via Wikimedia Commons. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0). Image has been cropped and brightened for use.

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