

To President Jim Ryan and Provost Ian Baucom
From: Concerned Faculty and Graduate Students of the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese
May 6, 2024

We wish to join our voices to those of our colleagues in the [Corcoran Department of History](#) and [College of Arts & Sciences](#) expressing our dismay about the events that unfolded on grounds on Saturday, May 4th, when Virginia State Police broke up a student protest near the UVA Chapel. Our students gathered at the Gaza Solidarity encampment to voice their opposition to the war in a manner so peaceful that the [Charlottesville Daily Progress](#) described it as “picnic-like.” Its dispersal seems to have been facilitated by a quiet, eleventh-hour alteration to a public-facing document indicating that the use of “recreational tents” was allowable. The Virginia State Police carried out its actions with excessive force, using riot shields, pepper spray, and tackling people to the ground. And neither of you, President Ryan and Provost Baucom, were anywhere to be seen as the police used chemical agents on our students, faculty, and community members.

It is not lost upon us that May 4 was the anniversary of the murder of four student protesters at Kent State University. Neither is it lost upon us that seven years ago, University authorities and law enforcement stood idly by while torch-bearing Nazis paraded through the grounds shouting anti-semitic hate speech, and menaced terrified students who found themselves surrounded at the Jefferson statue north of the Rotunda. Please do not insist that Saturday’s incident represented a “neutral application and enforcement” of the rules when the University has such a deplorable track record at such enforcement. As faculty who study the Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese-speaking worlds, we regularly teach our students about histories of student activism and about the profound consequences of state violence and administrative procedures that become weaponized to condemn some types of speech. As those of us who witnessed the police violence can attest, students at the Gaza solidarity encampment and bystanders were peaceful, and students voiced their convictions in consistency with the norms and practices of non-violent, civil disobedience. The disproportionately violent and severe response from our university administrators represents a breach of trust and a failure to honor the democratic ideals that this university claims to uphold.

We insist that all charges against those arrested on May 4th be immediately dropped (including charges of trespass), that students barred from campus be allowed to return to their rooms to prepare for final exams, that you accept full responsibility for the disproportionate response of the police, that you issue an apology to the individuals whose free speech rights were unjustifiably suppressed, that you provide mental health and legal support for students and community members who were unjustly detained for supporting anti-war efforts in Gaza, and that you take meaningful action to guarantee that future, peaceful expressions of opinion will be protected. All universities have a duty to protect free speech, but it is especially incumbent on *public* universities to do so. Students at public institutions around the world, including the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, in Mexico City, the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, in Lima, Perú, and the Universidad de Valencia, in Spain, have organized solidarity campaigns to support peaceful protests for Palestinian self-determination. We can learn a

valuable lesson from them: that educational spaces should be committed to shared democratic values, which we cannot take for granted. We all have a duty to protect them. The very definition of a university, and its educational mission, is at stake here.

You would do well to review the actions of President Edgar Shannon, who rose to the challenge of the Vietnam-era protests with a degree of wisdom and courage rarely seen among university administrators facing such situations. Why did the protests not become violent at UVA, as they did at so many other universities? Because our president provided real leadership, and modeled how an intellectual community dedicated to the free exchange of ideas handles passionate controversy. *That* is what “great and good” looks like.

Signed,

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