



May 3, 2019

Maud Mandel, President
Office of the President
Williams College
880 Main Street | Hopkins Hall, 3rd Floor
POB 687
Williamstown, MA 01267

Dear President Mandel,

We write as chair of the advisory board, interim executive director, and incoming executive director, respectively, of the [Academic Engagement Network \(AEN\)](#), a national organization comprised of nearly 700 faculty members on more than 220 campuses across the United States. AEN seeks to counter the delegitimization of Israel on campus, helps to defend campus free speech and academic freedom, promotes robust discussion of Israel in the academy, and responds to antisemitism on campus when it occurs.

We write to express our dismay that the Williams College student-run College Council (CC) has recently [denied the request](#) of *Williams Initiative for Israel* (WIFI) to become a registered student organization (RSO). At its April 23 meeting, CC voted 13-8 with one abstention against recognizing WIFI as an RSO. We note with concern that [transparency of the proceedings](#) appears to have been compromised: CC members voted anonymously; there was no livestream recording of the meeting; minutes were kept anonymous; and only three council members reportedly participated in the controversial debate, with none stating the reason for voting as they did.

WIFI is [reportedly](#) the first student club in over a decade which has failed to gain RSO status despite having been found to be in compliance with all CC bylaws and regulations for recognition. According to media reports of the CC meeting and the [statements](#) of opponents, it is clear that the rejection of WIFI's RSO application was based purely on political opinions regarding its mission. According to its leadership, WIFI [aims](#) to promote education about Israel, celebrate Israeli cultural events, advocate for Israel's right to exist, and "bring an additional perspective" to the campus discourse regarding the Middle East conflict. These are admirable goals, yet WIFI's recognition as an official RSO was opposed solely because of these stances. In essence, WIFI was [told](#) that it had to be de-platformed because it's mission allegedly "ignores and indirectly endorses" Israel's "violent practices", the "occupation of Palestinian land", and the "ethnic cleansing and genocide of Palestinians."

If Williams College was a public university, the CC's decision against WIFI would be a violation of the First Amendment. Under *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169 (1972), ideology is not lawful grounds for denying recognition to a student club. Williams College is a private institution but we note that it has voluntarily decided to promote robust open inquiry and to protect freedom of expression. Indeed,

several weeks ago you sent a [campus-wide email](#) in which you reaffirmed these principles. You stated that the school’s goal “shouldn’t be to avoid disagreement or dissent, but to develop ways of engaging in it without losing respect for each other as people.”

The policies of Williams College aim to implement these laudable principles. According to its [Code of Conduct](#), the school is “committed to being a community in which all ranges of opinion and belief can be expressed and debated...The College seeks to assure the right of all to express themselves in words and actions, so long as they can do so without infringing upon the rights of others or violating standards of good conduct or public law.”

While not a public university bound by the First Amendment, Williams College is nonetheless obligated to adhere to its own stated principles and policies. Consequently, we urge you to take immediate action to reverse the decision of the CC and to give WIFI the RSO recognition that it deserves.

In closing, we would like to bring to your attention the fact that a chapter of the national organization *Students for Justice in Palestine* (SJP) has long had RSO status on your campus. We urge you to give those with different perspectives, such as WIFI, the same opportunity to be heard. Doing so would send a strong message to your students that ideological conformity is antithetical to the principles and policies of Williams College. It would also signal to Jewish and pro-Israel students that their ostracism from campus life will not be tolerated and that they are valued members of the Williams College community.

Sincerely yours,



Mark G. Yudof
Chair, Advisory Board



Michael Atkins
Interim Executive Director



Miriam F. Elman
Incoming Executive Director