



June 26, 2020

President John Thrasher
Office of the President | 211 Westcott Building
Florida State University
Tallahassee, FL 32306

Via email to president@fsu.edu

Dear President Thrasher,

We write as chair of the Advisory Board, Executive Director, and Deputy Executive Director, respectively, of the [Academic Engagement Network \(AEN\)](#), with respect to antisemitism at Florida State University (FSU) and the effort to effectively combat it so as to improve the campus climate for Jewish students, and all FSU students.

AEN is an independent and non-partisan national organization comprised of over 750 faculty members on more than 260 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. Prominent university leaders and distinguished scholars serve on AEN's Advisory Board, including Irwin Cotler, Scott Cowen, Deborah E. Lipstadt, Steven Pinker, Lawrence H. Summers, and Stephen Joel Trachtenberg among others. In addition, several faculty members at Florida State University are also members of AEN.

We write first to express our support for your forceful condemnation of “anti-Semitism and religious discrimination” in your June 18 [statement](#), and for your unequivocal acknowledgement that they have “no place at Florida State University”. We are aware of the incidents at FSU that led to your decision to release this statement, namely the unacceptable antisemitic comments and remarks, online postings, and curated web-based project of FSU student Mr. Ahmad Daraldik, the recently elected President of the FSU Student Senate.

As you rightly noted in your statement, Mr. Daraldik has repeatedly posted [offensive antisemitic material and rhetoric](#) online. He has trafficked in antisemitic tropes and canards and has curated an entire website devoted to Holocaust inversion, an inverted reality where Israel's behavior toward the Palestinians is compared to that of the Nazis towards the Jews. These publicly posted remarks and materials cannot simply be excused as youthful indiscretions. In recent weeks, as the controversy has swirled around him, Mr. Daraldik has doubled down on his offensive rhetoric. While he has removed the posts and the website has been taken down, Mr. Daraldik has given little indication that he understands, or even wants to understand, the concerns that have been expressed and appears

unwilling to commit himself to learning how and why his Jewish peers find his discourse so deeply hurtful.

This upsetting situation has been compounded by what looks like a troubling double standard. As you know, Mr. Daraldik's immediate predecessor was ousted from his position after making [controversial private remarks](#) about the Black Lives Matter movement as they relate to his Catholic faith. The FSU Student Senate determined that his comments caused offense to student communities which felt targeted by them, and consequently, that he could not serve all students effectively. By voting out a student leader who made what were considered derogatory remarks against the LGBT community in a private chat, it is unacceptable and insensitive to then give a pass to another student leader who exhibits a consistent pattern of blatant antisemitic rhetoric in multiple public online and social media forum.

Given these circumstances, many Jewish students at FSU are understandably feeling marginalized and demoralized. A [petition](#) to have Mr. Daraldik removed from office has, as of this writing, garnered over 8,000 student signatures, and we are aware that FSU Jewish student groups are also calling for a second vote of no-confidence in his leadership. We support the FSU students in these efforts and agree that Mr. Daraldik should step down. The Student Senate should be working to create an inclusive and welcoming learning community for all. It is difficult to see how the majority of Jewish students at FSU, and certainly those who identify with the State of Israel, can feel themselves well-represented, much less respected, with Mr. Daraldik as President of the student governing body.

While we were disappointed that you did not call for Mr. Daraldik's removal, in your statement you helpfully recognized that many members of your campus community are currently feeling upset and alienated by this controversy and that they want assurances from you that "FSU remains a community that embraces them". We also appreciate that, in condemning and rejecting Mr. Daraldik's hateful rhetoric as antithetical to FSU values of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion, you did so "while at the same time defending the right to free speech even when we find the speech abhorrent." Antisemitic and other prejudiced expression is constitutionally protected speech so long as there is not an immediate threat to safety. But the fact that our jurisprudence allows for such freedom of expression does not mean that this speech does not inflict injury to those so malevolently attacked. It is for this reason that we believe that Mr. Daraldik is unfit to lead the Student Senate.

In the weeks and months ahead, as you work to advance a "diverse environment" at FSU and engage with others on constructive solutions to the current crisis, we hope that you will use your statement as a springboard for an action plan that will help to create the inclusive environment and positive learning environment that you so strongly support. In particular, we encourage you to:

- *Fund high-profile campus speaker events that will present students with diverse views about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.* Given the controversy over Mr. Daraldik's presidency, it is imperative that FSU students hear from a range of scholars and practitioners who can expose them to a diverse set of historical and political perspectives. In the short term, for the upcoming academic year, speakers should be selected with an eye toward modeling how a robust and critical discourse on Israel and Palestine can be achieved without any group on campus feeling isolated, demoralized, or under siege.

- *Hire new faculty who can ensure pluralism in the campus curriculum about Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.* While FSU has highly-regarded faculty who can teach about Judaism and the Holocaust, we notice that there are few faculty with expertise to teach rigorous and robust courses within the field of Israel Studies. New lines in this field of study can help to cultivate greater knowledge and understanding about these deeply contentious topics that often divide students who are less informed.
- *Develop and implement an antisemitism awareness training program for university staff and students, including leaders in the Student Senate.* University administrators and staff members who are charged with protecting the rights of all students must have the support, resources and training they need to effectively address the issues and concerns that directly impact Jewish student life on campus. Training for staff and student leaders must offer a full understanding of antisemitism, along with its multiple manifestations on the far right and the far left.

We believe that these measures will help remedy the current situation on your campus, and will help you to move forward in the right direction as an academic institution that honors free expression and open inquiry while ensuring that all individuals and communities feel valued, welcomed, and respected.

We are available to further discuss these recommendations with you and would be happy to share with you our expertise and the best practices that we have developed for advancing Israel literacy, recognizing and countering antisemitism, and ensuring academic freedom and free speech on campus. AEN has a Speakers Bureau, including a number of distinguished scholars who could speak on your campus in the coming year. We also are able to put you in touch with other university leaders who are currently developing and implementing antisemitism awareness training programs on their own campuses, so that you may consult with them.

If any of these suggestions are of interest, please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Sincerely yours,

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