



November 24, 2020

President Martha E. Pollack  
Office of the President  
Cornell University

via email: [president@cornell.edu](mailto:president@cornell.edu)

Dear President Pollack,

We write as chair of the Advisory Board, Executive Director, and Deputy Executive Director, respectively, of the [Academic Engagement Network \(AEN\)](#) to offer our support and resources as you work to create an inclusive campus environment for Jewish and all students at Cornell University.

AEN is an independent and non-partisan national organization of over 750 faculty members on more than 265 campuses. 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, Roger D. Kornberg, Deborah E. Lipstadt, Steven Pinker, Lawrence H. Summers, and Stephen Joel Trachtenberg, among others. In addition, several Cornell University faculty members are longtime members of AEN.

We were impressed with the powerful [statement](#) you released last February in which you rejected anti-Israel divestment as divisive, polarizing and inimical to Cornell's values and mission. We commend you for acknowledging that BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) "frequently conflates the policies of the Israeli government with the very right of Israel to exist as a nation" and for sharing with the Cornell community that you personally find this stance "particularly troublesome." We appreciate too your strong commitment to campus free speech rights which you recently reiterated earlier this month, [noting](#) that Cornell upholds a "core belief that learning flourishes in an environment where diverse ideas are presented and debated without hindrance."

Given your goals for Cornell, we thought that you may be interested to know that AEN recently launched an [Improving the Campus Climate Initiative \(ICCI\)](#) which aims to assist university leaders to meet the needs and concerns of Jewish students while also promoting an equitable, inclusive and diverse campus community where free expression and open inquiry thrives. Geared for mid-level university administrators and staff, *ICCI* aims to provide them with the specialized training in antisemitism awareness that they need to effectively address the issues that directly impact Jewish student life on campus. We are closely [coordinating our efforts](#) with Hillel International which recently launched a similar [initiative](#) of its own.

Through its executive team, advisory board members, and members of its national faculty network, AEN has considerable expertise in helping universities develop and deliver such trainings. We are available at your convenience to offer input and to help you think through what an antisemitism awareness training and education program for Cornell staff might look like. To these ends, we are also able to put you in

touch with other university leaders—for example at NYU and UC-Berkeley—who have developed and are now implementing [antisemitism awareness training programs](#) for staff members and professionals in the diversity space on their own campuses, so that you may consult with them.

What has also occasioned our decision to write to you now is our concern about a [recent guest lecture](#) which was hosted by Cornell University's College of Architecture, Art, and Planning. We are troubled by the rhetoric and materials disseminated during this online event. Based on [documentation](#) provided by those who attended (including a Cornell faculty member who is a member of our organization) and the guest speaker's own social media [posts](#), the lecture involved hateful rhetoric and imagery. The speaker's remarks and the visual material shared in her presentation unequivocally crossed the line from legitimate criticism of Israel and Zionism into a dangerous form of antisemitism.

Specifically, the guest speaker dehumanized Jewish immigrants and pioneers of modern-day Israel by purposely "blackening out" photographs of "Jewish" soldiers, politicians and other Jewish people in iconic images from the pre-1948 period. Appallingly, in justifying this erasure of Jewish bodies, the lecturer reportedly stated during her talk that "I can't bear to look at them." We hope that the Cornell University faculty member who organized this talk will reach out to the Executive Director of Cornell's Hillel and to other colleagues in order to better understand why Jewish audience members and [others](#) were so alarmed by this presentation, finding it offensive and painful.

We are certain you will agree that such expressions of hatred should have no place at Cornell University, where discussions over controversial topics will best lead to genuine learning and understanding when they occur in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance. As you work to ensure that your campus is a welcoming place for Jewish and all students, we urge you to undertake a university-wide initiative to address and counter antisemitism on the Cornell campus in order to foster the positive learning environment that you so strongly support.

If we can be of assistance, please do not hesitate to reach out to us. We would be pleased to collaborate with the executive staff of Cornell Hillel to support your efforts as well, if desired.

Sincerely yours,



Mark G. Yudof | Chair, Advisory Board  
(510) 409-2484  
[mark@academicengagement.org](mailto:mark@academicengagement.org)



Miriam F. Elman | Executive Director  
(315) 956-0725  
[miriam@academicengagement.org](mailto:miriam@academicengagement.org)



Michael B. Atkins | Deputy Executive Director  
(914) 830-1102  
[mike@academicengagement.org](mailto:mike@academicengagement.org)

cc: Michael I. Kotlikoff, Provost ([provost@cornell.edu](mailto:provost@cornell.edu)); Ryan Lombardi, Vice President for Student and Campus Life ([ryan.lombardi@cornell.edu](mailto:ryan.lombardi@cornell.edu)); Rabbi Ari Weiss, Executive Director of Cornell Hillel ([adw224@cornell.edu](mailto:adw224@cornell.edu)).