



November 4, 2021

Timothy D. Sands

President

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech)

Blacksburg, VA 24061

Email: president@vt.edu

Dear President Sands,

We write as chair of the Advisory Board, Executive Director, and Managing Director, respectively, of the [Academic Engagement Network \(AEN\)](#) to convey our concerns regarding Resolution 2021-22N3 in support of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel which your Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) passed a few weeks ago.

AEN is an independent and non-partisan national organization comprised of over 800 faculty members on more than 250 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, Deborah E. Lipstadt, Steven Pinker, Donna Shalala, Lawrence H. Summers, and Stephen Joel Trachtenberg among others.

The graduate student body's call for Virginia Tech to implement an academic boycott of Israel, in compliance with the guidelines established by the vehemently anti-Israel *Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel* (PACBI), runs roughshod over the commitment to open inquiry, academic freedom, and campus free expression. We commend you for unequivocally expressing your strong support for these fundamental principles in your October 29 [statement](#), which addressed this recently passed pro-BDS resolution. However, we were disappointed that you did not use this opportunity to remind the campus community that Virginia Tech is firmly opposed to academic boycotts. Further, as we note below, given how alienated and demoralized Jewish students on your campus are now feeling with the passage of this offensive and divisive resolution, we had hoped that you would have used your recently released message to highlight how you will be working to improve the campus climate.

It is disheartening that Virginia Tech graduate students, who will soon enter the professoriate, have embraced the academic boycott of Israel. As noted by the *American Association of University Professors* (AAUP) and hundreds of university leaders, including recently the [chancellors](#) of the University of

California campuses, academic boycotts are inherently discriminatory and detrimental to the core values that define the academy, namely the open and unfettered communication of ideas and the academic freedom to conduct intellectual exchange without fear of retaliation. In addition to impeding open intellectual inquiry, it is important to recognize that implementing an academic boycott of Israel in accordance with PACBI guidelines—including by shutting down study abroad programs; refusing to write [letters of recommendation](#) for students who wish to study in Israel; and “resisting” all educational activities involving collaboration with Israel’s institutions of higher education, such as those that promote coexistence and which bring Israeli and Palestinian scholars together on joint projects—would harm Virginia Tech students by denying them valuable educational opportunities.

We admire your goal of fostering a campus climate that supports “active listening, empathy, and constructive dialogue,” as you noted in your October 29 statement. In this regard, we note that student activism around BDS is inimical to this inclusive, tolerant, and respectful learning community to which you aspire. As has been documented in numerous studies and [reports](#), BDS coarsens the discourse, and promotes prejudice and hate which isolates, demeans, and marginalizes Jews on campus. Quite frankly, BDS activism creates divisions and polarizes the campus community. Research that we have recently released shows that pro-BDS student activism leads to a [marked increase](#) in antisemitic incidents and bias reporting on campus. While many well-meaning people gravitate to BDS believing that it offers a means for advancing social justice and peace in the Middle East, the reality is that this movement is reactionary and fundamentally illiberal.

From our vantage point, we are increasingly concerned that unbridled hatred of Israel is undermining the mission of the academy. While most U.S. campuses are not awash in antisemitism, recent trends point to an increasingly [challenging climate](#) for Jewish students, faculty, and staff, especially those for whom Zionism is an integral part of their identity and their ethnic and ancestral heritage. The Anti-Defamation League has reported that antisemitic hate crimes and bias incidents on college campuses more than tripled from 2012 to 2019. These include explicit antisemitic incidents, such as vandalism and graffiti, as well as more pernicious way of targeting, [excluding and ostracizing](#), and demoralizing those who wish to openly express identification with Israel. Online [harassment and intimidation](#) of Jewish students and the defacement of Jewish campus property has continued over the past two years, even with many campuses closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition, the resolution inaccurately asserts that Israel’s universities “oppress Palestinians.” In fact, Jewish-Arab coexistence is modeled on Israel’s campuses. Israel’s higher education institutions are leaders in uniting diverse populations in Israel. In the past decade the number of Arab students in Israeli academia has doubled. At the University of Haifa, for example, Arabs make up 32% of the student body (while Arabs comprise approximately 20% of Israel’s citizenry) and there are multiple programs designed to foster multicultural engagements among students. We invite you to view this [recent AEN webinar](#) featuring two presidents of Israeli campuses in order to get a better sense of how Israel’s academic leaders are investing in diversity and inclusion.

Lastly, in delegitimizing Israel and denigrating Virginia Tech students who are attached to Israel and who support the right of the Jewish people to self-determination, the GPSS resolution traffics in incendiary language which must be called out and roundly condemned. We are dismayed, for instance, that the resolution refers to the “lynching” of Palestinian citizens of Israel. Given Virginia’s history of racial injustices, the use of this kind of inflammatory language to describe complex situations occurring thousands of miles away, and in a very different context, not only diminishes our understanding of Israel and the intractable Middle East conflict; it also works to incite hostility toward Jews on your campus. While opposition to Zionism and criticism of the actions and policies of Israel is protected expression, it

is important to recognize that some ways of voicing opposition to Israel or Zionism are not simply controversial statements of disagreement over politics and policy, but may also be assertions of prejudice and intolerance toward Jewish people, heritage, and culture.

In the coming months, we hope that you will use the unfortunate situation that has emerged on your campus as a springboard for an action plan that will work to create the inclusive environment and positive learning environment that you so strongly support. AEN has many resources to assist you in moving forward constructively 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 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.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to us.

Sincerely yours,



Mark G. Yudof, Chair of the Advisory Board

(510) 409-2484 | mark@academicengagement.org



Miriam F. Elman, Executive Director

(315) 956-0725 | miriam@academicengagement.org



Josh Suchoff, Managing Director

(845) 598-4756 | josh@academicengagement.org

Cc/ Cyril R. Clarke, Executive Vice President and Provost, clarkecr@vt.edu