The University of Texas at Austin Office of the President

Dear UT Community,

Universities play a key role in modern society, but the extent of that role is called into question when the world faces catastrophic events. The attack by the terrorist group Hamas on Israel on Oct. 7 is likely one of the most salient, important and horrifying events in recent decades. It has sparked debate about how universities should respond through collective or individual speech, supporting and protecting our communities, plus through our core activities of teaching and research.

This event has shaken our community and the world by its true atrocities, including the intentional targeting, kidnapping and murder of innocent civilians, children and babies; widespread calls for violence against Jews; and increases in antisemitic statements and violence. These have led to heightened concerns about the safety and well-being of Israeli, Jewish and Palestinian people on campuses in America, the Middle East and around the globe.

As a result, many have questioned the role of universities in responding by speaking out against Hamas, its actions and the growing antisemitism on campuses. Our University, like many top research universities, refrains from issuing institutional statements in response to major global or societal events unless there is a unique connection to our community, or it is a matter of public safety impacting our ability to operate. Universities such as ours produce and disseminate knowledge, and putting forth institutional positions on global events or policy issues can run counter to an environment characterized by free inquiry, debate, productive discourse and free speech. Such an environment is critical to our core missions of teaching and research.

There are costs to this approach, as well. One such cost occurs when friends and critics of a university like ours associate a lack of a public statement with a lack of caring, a lack of empathy, or even more damaging, with implied endorsement of actions that are hard or impossible to defend. Let me be perfectly clear: The acts of Hamas, including intentional violence toward innocent civilians and calls for the elimination of a people, deserve to be condemned and have absolutely no moral defense.

These events are connected to our University, beyond just the stark contrast between Hamas’s actions and our University’s values. They have raised concern about the safety and well-being of members of our community, and as I wrote last week, we will do all we can to protect and support all of our faculty, staff and students, and especially those most vulnerable, including our Jewish and Palestinian community members. I have zero tolerance for the antisemitic actions targeting our Jewish community or the hate-filled actions targeting our Palestinian and Muslim communities. Speech is protected on our campus, violence is not. We will be active in identifying any perpetrator and will strictly enforce our rules for safe behavior toward others. We are one UT community, and we will fiercely protect it.

We are committed to a university environment that encourages discourse, discovery and dissemination of knowledge, with support and care for all of our campus community. We must redouble our efforts to do what we do so well: teaching and research. Teaching is clearly important, as harkened to by the George Santayana quote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I encourage our students to consider our related course offerings for Spring 2024 and beyond, and all of us to read, learn and discuss more.

Research is important, as well, as it helps us better understand the key issues, contexts and consequences surrounding critical moments and movements. Our leadership team is committed to making further investments in both research and teaching to help our students and the broader community learn and discover more about these issues and the histories and cultures of the Israeli, Jewish and Palestinian peoples. We will work with faculty leaders during the coming months to deploy those resources and to increase our reach and impact.

My heart goes out to the millions of people affected by this war, and I especially mourn any loss of innocent life. Our campus community will continue to respond and come together, learn from each other, look out for each other, and do our very best to change the world for the better.

Sincerely yours,

Jay C. Hartzell

President

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