



February 23, 2026

Claire Shipman
Office of the President
Columbia University
535 W. 116th Street
202 Low Library
Mail Code 4324
New York, New York 10027

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (officeofthepresident@columbia.edu)

Dear President Shipman:

FIRE¹ is concerned by Columbia University's cancellation of the student-organized Olive Harvest Festival, which had been scheduled for November 12, 2025. While Columbia cited its Affirmation of Zero Tolerance (AZT) policy for the cancellation, canceling an expressive event because of distant association with a sanctioned student group violates Columbia students' associational freedoms. We urge Columbia to refrain from using its AZT policy to restrict students' expressive liberties.

Student organizers from Gender and Sexuality Alliance, Native American Council, Jewish Voice for Peace, Sunrise, and Columbia Palestine Solidarity Coalition (CPSC, also known as the New York City Palestine Solidarity Coalition) worked with University Event Management to schedule the Olive Harvest Festival, a Palestinian cultural event, for November 12, 2025, on Columbia's Butler Lawn and Plaza.² GSA, a student group in good standing with Columbia, was a key organizer.

On October 28, Associate Director of Student Engagement and Belonging Ashley Moody-Astwood emailed GSA President Syuba Malin Thurai to tell her that JVP was not in good

¹ As you may recall from prior correspondence, the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression defends free expression and other individual rights on America's university campuses. You can learn more about our mission at fire.org.

² Daksha Pillai, *Amid a crackdown on protests, students began organizing Palestinian cultural events. The University keeps canceling them.*, COLUMBIA SPECTATOR (Dec. 12, 2025), <https://www.columbiaspectator.com/news/2025/12/12/amid-a-crackdown-on-protests-students-began-organizing-palestinian-cultural-events-the-university-keeps-canceling-them/>. The recitation of facts here reflects our understanding of the pertinent information. We appreciate that you may have additional information and invite you to share it with us.

standing with the university and could not co-sponsor the event.³ Thurai promptly responded, “Thanks for letting me know, we were of the understanding that it was only CUAD^[4] that we could not be openly associated with. Apologies for the error on our part. Do we now have to resubmit the booking for space?”⁵ Moody-Astwood replied, “CUAD is [forbidden] in regard to the university’s affirmation of zero tolerance. In general any student group that is not in good standing with the university is not eligible to host or co-sponsor any events. You do not need to resubmit the booking for the space.”⁶ Planning for the event proceeded without incident: administrators and student organizers conducted an event review on November 5, during which they discussed logistics.⁷

Hours before the event on November 12, Moody-Astwood emailed GSA organizers regarding one of their flyers for the event, which featured the CPSC logo.⁸ Moody-Astwood contended that, per senior administrators, CPSC violated the AZT policy because they “reposted and collaborated with Columbia4Palestine[,] a group that posts statements for CUAD.”⁹ She continued: “Collaborating with Columbia4Palestine or any other group that posts statements for CUAD^[10] or amplifies CUADs posts violates the CU zero tolerance policy,” and ultimately said that CPSC’s logo must be removed, or else Olive Harvest would be canceled.¹¹ Receiving no response from the organizers, Moody-Astwood emailed three hours later and “postpone[d]” the event indefinitely.¹²

Columbia’s AZT policy states, in its entirety:¹³

The University has zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment based on protected traits. Our University Rules and Policies are well-defined on this matter.

³ Email from Ashley Moody-Astwood, Associate Director of Student Engagement and Belonging, to Syuba Malin Thurai, student (Oct. 28, 2025, 12:02 PM) (on file with author).

⁴ CUAD stands for Columbia University Apartheid Divest, which Columbia sanctioned in 2025 for holding encampments and demonstrations against humanitarian conditions in Gaza and the school’s financial ties to companies linked to the Israeli military.

⁵ Email from Thurai to Moody-Astwood (Oct. 28, 2025, 12:07 PM) (on file with author).

⁶ Email from Moody-Astwood to Thurai (Oct. 28, 2025, 12:31 PM) (on file with author).

⁷ Email from Moody-Astwood to Thurai (Oct. 30, 2025, 9:39 AM) (on file with author); Email from Christina DeDora, Manager of Events Administration, to Moody-Astwood (Nov. 5, 2025, 4:54 PM) (on file with author).

⁸ Email from Moody-Astwood to Leel Dias, student (Nov. 12, 2025, 10:24 AM) (on file with author).

⁹ *Id.*; see also Pillai, *supra* note 2 (“The Columbia4Palestine Instagram account does not identify itself as a CUAD affiliate in its profile information, but has previously published posts titled ‘CUAD statement on movement-wide repression’ and ‘CUAD statement on Tarek Bazrouk’s sentencing.’”).

¹⁰ See Pillai, *supra* note 2 (CPSC associated with Columbia4Palestine in a collaborative Instagram post on November 9 expressing disapproval of an on-campus event honoring former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin); see also COLUMBIA SUNRISE MOVEMENT (@sunrisecolumbia), INSTAGRAM (Nov. 9, 2025), <https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ2ykvjAxi/?hl=en> [<https://perma.cc/4HZF-ZKLY>].

¹¹ Moody-Astwood, *supra* note 8. Neither Columbia4Palestine nor CUAD organized or sponsored the event.

¹² Email from Moody-Astwood to Dias (Nov. 12, 2025, 2:58 PM) (on file with author).

¹³ *Affirmation of Zero Tolerance*, COLUMBIA UNIV., <https://president.columbia.edu/content/affirmation-zero-tolerance> [<https://perma.cc/R25F-W7AZ>] (last visited Feb. 11, 2026).

Any organizations, of any sort, that promote violence or encourage disruptions of our academic mission are not welcome on our campuses and the University will not engage with them.

Columbia has not, and will not, recognize or meet with the group that calls itself “Columbia University Apartheid Divest” (CUAD), its representatives, or any of its affiliated organizations.

Columbia proudly boasts “that all members of our community may engage in our cherished traditions of free expression and open debate.”¹⁴ These commitments to free speech—and a reasonable student’s interpretation of these commitments—are informed by decades of First Amendment jurisprudence and New York contract law.¹⁵

The First Amendment guarantees freedom of association, which protects the “right to associate with others in pursuit of a wide variety of political, social, economic, educational, religious, and cultural ends.”¹⁶ As a corollary, the First Amendment also forbids “guilt by association.”¹⁷ These principles shield “against laws that make group membership less attractive”¹⁸ and protect university students’ right to host recruitment, social, and other expressive events.¹⁹ They also forbid placing “liability on an individual solely because of his association with another.”²⁰

Columbia’s cancellation of the Olive Harvest Festival takes the concept of guilt by association to an extreme degree. The university’s reasoning appears to be the following: GSA associated with CPSC in co-sponsoring Olive Harvest. CPSC associated with Columbia4Palestine in a collaborative Instagram post unrelated to Olive Harvest. Columbia4Palestine associated with CUAD in sharing two of their statements on Instagram (again, unrelated to Olive Harvest).

¹⁴ *The Rules of University Conduct*, § 440. Affirmative Statement, COLUMBIA UNIV., <https://universitypolicies.columbia.edu/content/rules-university-conduct%20> [https://perma.cc/3T3L-AXRP] (“To be true to these principles, the University cannot and will not rule any subject or form of expression out of order on the ground that it is objectionable, offensive, immoral, or untrue.”).

¹⁵ See *Novio v. N.Y. Acad. of Art*, 317 F. Supp. 3d 803, 805 (S.D.N.Y. 2018) (“New York State courts have permitted a student to bring a breach of implied contract action against an institution of higher education.”) (quoting *Keefe v. N.Y. Law Sch.*, 906 N.Y.S.2d 773 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 2009), *aff’d*, 897 N.Y.S.2d 773 (N.Y. Sup. Ct. 2010)).

¹⁶ *Roberts v. U.S. Jaycees*, 468 U.S. 609, 622 (1984); see also, e.g., *NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware Co.*, 458 U.S. 886, 888 (1982) (“[T]he First Amendment restricts the ability of the State to impose liability on an individual solely because of his association with another.”). This applies regardless of the genesis of the restriction, whether it be a university policy (*Chi Iota Colony of Alpha Epsilon Pi Fraternity v. City Univ. of N.Y.*, 502 F.3d 136, 139 (2d Cir. 2007)); a university’s directive banning student group social functions (*Gay Students Org. of Univ. of N.H. v. Bonner*, 509 F.2d 652, 654 (1st Cir. 1974)); or a university’s discipline for student group misconduct (*Iota Xi, Sigma Chi Fraternity v. Patterson*, 566 F.3d 138, 141 (4th Cir. 2009)).

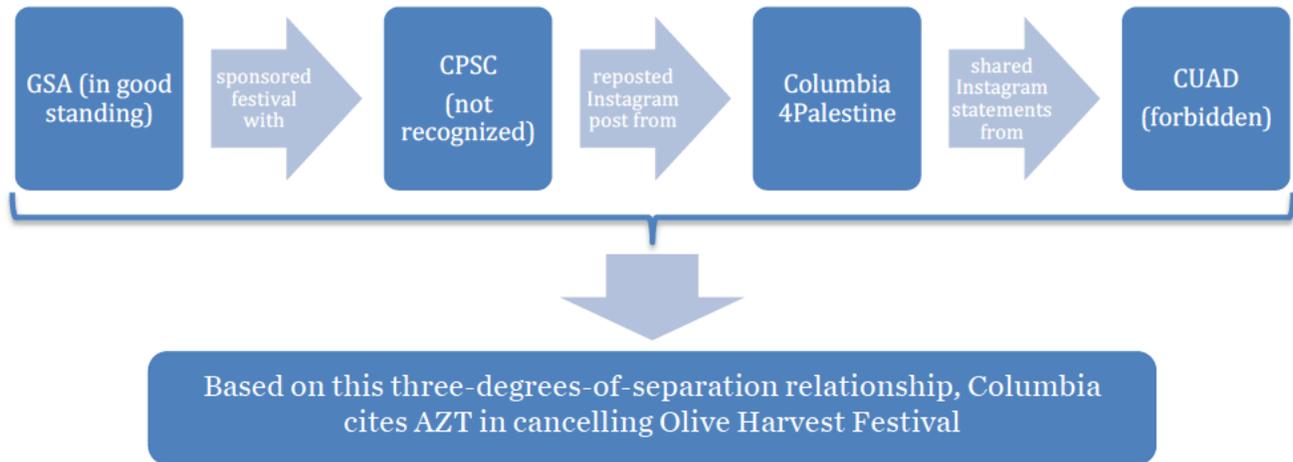
¹⁷ *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 186 (1972).

¹⁸ *U.S. Citizens Ass’n v. Sebelius*, 705 F.3d 588, 600 (6th Cir. 2013).

¹⁹ *Id.* Courts have correctly invalidated even far less onerous restrictions as impermissible burdens on associational freedom. *Bonner*, 509 F.2d at 659–60 (university’s ban on a single student group’s social events was “a substantial abridgment of associational rights” due to “the important role that social events can play in individuals’ efforts to associate to further their common beliefs”); see *NAACP v. Ala. ex rel. Patterson*, 357 U.S. 449, 462–63 (1958) (compelling disclosure of membership lists was “a substantial restraint upon the exercise by [NAACP chapter] members of their right to freedom of association”).

²⁰ *Claiborne*, 458 U.S. at 918–19.

Columbia does not appear to have alleged that either Columbia4Palestine or CUAD were actually involved with Olive Harvest, yet they are effectively being treated as co-organizers, allowing Columbia to punish the official organizers—including the recognized student groups who engaged with administrators in good faith to organize the event.



This use of the AZT policy effectively gives administrators carte blanche to suppress any student expressive events they desire, so long as they can establish some link, however tenuous, to CUAD. Columbia’s actions make clear that there is no limit to the “stain” of perceived association with CUAD and its members. Any contact among like-minded students on these issues is fraught with peril, since those contacts may, at the last minute, somehow be linked to CUAD through a “six degrees of separation”-style relationship that Columbia will consider strong enough to justify canceling long-planned events. Whatever quarrels administrators have with CUAD, it is unconscionable to use the AZT policy to go after associates of associates of associates. To that end, the vague and overbroad nature of the AZT policy and its application is of deep concern.²¹ Our nation’s history has, unfortunately, given us a word that precisely describes Columbia’s behavior in this situation: McCarthyism. The only difference is that it has changed the ideological target of that behavior.

Thankfully, however, our nation’s history also shows how we ultimately escaped the trap of ever-spreading guilt by association. In *Healy v. James*, a case decided in 1972 amidst the far more violent and destructive protests surrounding civil rights and the Vietnam War, the Supreme Court held that a university president’s decision to deny recognition to a chapter of Students for a Democratic Society on the basis that it was affiliated with groups that engaged in violence during “widespread civil disobedience on some campuses, accompanied by the seizure of buildings, vandalism, and arson,” violated the rights of those students, who had themselves been accused of no wrongdoing.²² If even this formal association with organizations that engaged in violence did not justify denying organizations their associational rights, the

²¹ See *Grayned v. City of Rockford*, 408 U.S. 104, 108-09 (1972) (Prohibitions must be “clearly defined,” so that “the person of ordinary intelligence [has] a reasonable opportunity to know what is prohibited, so that he may act accordingly.”) A person of ordinary intelligence cannot possibly know whether student groups have enough association with CUAD to fall under the AZT policy. The degree of association that is prohibited under the policy is not clear, considering how broadly “any of its affiliated organizations” is interpreted and applied.

²² 408 U.S. at 171, 181.

informal and attenuated relationship Columbia seems to think exists among the groups involved in Olive Harvest cannot possibly serve as a justification to sanction students or student groups.

We request a substantive response to this letter no later than the close of business on March 5, confirming that Columbia will not use AZT or any other policy to infringe on students' associational freedoms.

Sincerely,



Garrett Gravley
Program Counsel, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Jonathan Lavine, Chair Emeritus of the Board of Trustees
Jeh Johnson, Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees
David Greenwald, Co-Chair of the Board of Trustees
Christina DeDora, Manager of Events Administration
Kamala Kiem, Dean of Undergraduate Student Life

Encl.