

July 27, 2026

Mike Muñoz
Office of the President
Long Beach City College
1305 East Pacific Coast Highway T-2054
Long Beach, California 90806

Sent via U.S. Mail and Electronic Mail (mmunoz@lbcc.edu)

Dear President Muñoz:

FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative¹ is concerned by Long Beach Community College's chilling investigation into Paloma Maciel, co-editor-in-chief of LBCC's student-run newspaper, *The Viking News*, for asking administrators about irregularities in a student government election. Investigations like LBCC's send the message that student journalists risk formal disciplinary investigations when they attempt to gather news from college administrators. That chilling effect is incompatible with the First Amendment's protections for press freedom. LBCC must therefore refrain from investigating student journalists accused of nothing more than protected newsgathering.

On May 8, Maciel interviewed Dean of Student Affairs Deborah Miller-Calvert about alleged irregularities in the recently concluded Associated Student Body election.² Maciel then attempted to interview ASB Adviser Kim Hamon, whose office was in the same building.³ Hamon declined to comment and left the office.⁴ Maciel at no point obstructed Hamon's ability to leave, nor did Hamon's office ask Maciel to leave.⁵ She left when she was unable to gather further comment from LBCC officials.⁶

On May 11, Student Conduct Coordinator Vincent Lopez notified Maciel that she had "allegedly engaged in ... increasingly harassing and aggressive behavior under the pretense of requesting

¹ As you may recall from prior correspondence, FIRE is a nonpartisan nonprofit that defends free speech. You can learn more about our mission and activities at fire.org. FIRE's Student Press Freedom Initiative (SPFI) defends free press on campus by advocating for the rights of student journalists at colleges and universities across the country.

² The Viking News, *Editorial: An attempt to silence one reporter, is an attempt to silence all*, THE VIKING NEWS, (May 20, 2026), <https://lbccviking.com/?p=23707>.

³ *Id.* Hamon uses they/them/their pronouns.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

interviews about the ASB election.”⁷ The letter further alleged that Maciel “physically blocked” Hamon from leaving the office, which made Hamon feel “unsafe” and allegedly forced Hamon to leave the office.⁸ The letter formally accused Maciel of violating the LBCC Student Code of Conduct’s provisions regulating obstruction and failure to comply with Hamon’s ostensible request that she leave and threatened her with disciplinary sanctions.⁹

On June 2, Maciel met with Student Services Executive Vice President Nohel Corral to discuss the May 8 incident,¹⁰ and the following day, Corral sent Maciel a letter formally ending the investigation and removing the threat of disciplinary action.¹¹ However, the investigation was effective in quashing Maciel’s effort to report on the ASB election. In an interview with Long Beach’s *Signal Tribune*, Maciel said she “didn’t feel comfortable continuing [covering ASB elections]” and “stopped asking the ASB president or other students what was going on because [she] had to focus on [the student conduct process].”¹²

As LBCC is a public college, the First Amendment applies with full force to its actions¹³ — including the pursuit of disciplinary sanctions.¹⁴ LBCC’s investigation into Maciel for First Amendment-protected newsgathering raises serious constitutional concerns. The constitutional issue is not whether the college ultimately metes out formal punishment, but whether its actions would “chill or silence a person of ordinary firmness from future First Amendment activities.”¹⁵ LBCC’s investigation has done just that: Maciel no longer feels comfortable performing protected newsgathering activities.

LBCC’s obligation to avoid chilling First Amendment rights does not mean it may not take steps to address legitimate complaints. After receiving a complaint, public institutions should conduct a preliminary internal review of the complaint to establish exactly what the respondent is alleged to have done. If that review confirms the complaint references only protected expression, the college should close the case without ever notifying the speaker—

⁷ Letter from Vincent Lopez, Student Conduct Coordinator, to Paloma Maciel, student, 1 (May 11, 2026) <https://lbccviking.com/?p=23611>.

⁸ *Id.* The college’s letter makes no effort to harmonize the inconsistent claims that Maciel both blocked Hamon’s exit path and forced Hamon to exit.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Samuel Chacko, *Viking News Co-EIC’s student conduct letter leaves LBCC journalists concerned about press rights*, SIGNAL TRIBUNE, (June 26, 2026) https://sigtrib.com/viking-news-co-eics-student-conduct-letter-leaves-lbcc-journalists-concerned-about-press-rights/?utm_source=collegejournalism.beehiiv.com&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_campaign=interviewing-anxiety-laziness-here-s-how-to-help&_bhlid=fd39f7.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972) (“[T]he precedents of this Court leave no room for the view that, because of the acknowledged need for order, First Amendment protections should apply with less force on college campuses than in the community at large. Quite to the contrary, ‘the vigilant protection of constitutional freedoms is nowhere more vital than in the community of American schools.’”) (internal citation omitted).

¹⁴ *Papish v. Bd. of Curators of the Univ. of Mo.*, 410 U.S. 667, 667–68 (1973).

¹⁵ *Mendocino Env’t Ctr. v. Mendocino Cnty.*, 192 F.3d 1283, 1300 (9th Cir. 1999).

thus avoiding a chilling effect—while offering support to the aggrieved complainant.¹⁶ Here, Hamon alleged that Maciel obstructed their path, something the college could investigate. But in the same complaint, Hamon alleged Maciel forced them to flee their office. Since these allegations appear incompatible, the college’s internal review should first have clarified what, exactly, Hamon had alleged before notifying Maciel. Such a review would almost certainly have revealed that Maciel did not physically obstruct Hamon’s exit and that Maciel’s questioning, however aggressive Hamon may have felt it to be, was fully protected by the First Amendment. This is clear from the college’s decision to drop all charges against Maciel after the investigatory interview. Notwithstanding Hamon’s concerns,¹⁷ such a review would have shown Maciel was accused of nothing more than engaging in protected expression.

LBCC has an obligation to address genuine threats of violence against its employees, but in doing so it must not sacrifice its commitment to press freedom. Summoning a student to a mandatory investigative hearing in which they are accused only of protected expression will inevitably chill student speech. And that chill is unacceptable at an institution that, like LBCC, is bound by the First Amendment. FIRE requests that, going forward, LBCC reexamine its policies and practices so that it avoids such needlessly chilling investigations. FIRE would be pleased to collaborate with your administration to improve its policies and practices (for free, of course, in accordance with our charitable mission). We request a substantive response to this letter no later than the close of business on Monday, August 10, 2026.

Sincerely,



Dominic Coletti
Student Press Program Officer, Campus Rights Advocacy

Cc: Nohel C. Corral, Executive Vice President, Student Services
Vincent Lopez, Student Conduct Coordinator

¹⁶ See Haley Gluhanich, *Victory: Stanford adopts FIRE recommendation, will no longer notify students accused of engaging in protected speech*, FIRE, (Apr. 18, 2023) <https://www.fire.org/news/victory-stanford-adopts-fire-recommendation-will-no-longer-notify-students-accused-engaging> (offering an example policy that avoids needlessly chilling speech).

¹⁷ See *Counterman v. Colorado*, 600 U.S. 66, 70, 73 (2023) (holding even genuine fear on the part of a listener was insufficient to constitute a true threat).