

From: **Chancellor Gene D. Block** <chancellor@ucla.edu>

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Subject: A Message from Chancellor Block on the Importance of Civil Discourse

To: allemployees@bruinpost.ucla.edu

Office of the Chancellor

To the Campus Community:

Over the past week, many of our students, as well as friends off campus, have communicated their concerns over a pledge that candidates for our student government were asked to sign prior to last week's elections. Heated exchanges have occurred over the issue and have unfortunately left some feeling disrespected or targeted because of their views or affiliations. Certain news reports and other communications through social media have also mischaracterized aspects of the situation, fueling an unhealthy discourse that is harmful to our campus climate. Robust debate is vital to democratic learning, but it can never exclude common sense, civility and tolerance for those who disagree.

First, let me set the record straight on the facts, as we understand them: Students active in student government, who have varying views on Israel–Palestine issues, have participated in the recent past in free trips to the Middle East organized by Jewish groups. Prior to the recent student elections, some student groups asked candidates to sign a pledge promising not to go on such trips. The pledge was not sanctioned, proposed or required by our current student government or the university administration. No one was barred from running for office, participating in the election or serving on the council as a result of not signing the pledge. Some students signed, others did not. Both signatories and non-signatories won offices. The decision to circulate this pledge and the choice to sign it or not fall squarely within the

realm of free speech, and free speech is sacrosanct to any university campus.

Second, just because speech is constitutionally protected doesn't mean that it is wise, fair or productive. I am troubled that the pledge sought to delegitimize educational trips offered by some organizations but not others. I am troubled that the pledge can reasonably be seen as trying to eliminate selected viewpoints from the discussion. I condemn any remarks on social media or elsewhere that are disrespectful or hurtful.

Political speech that stigmatizes or casts aspersions on individuals or particular groups does not promote healthy debate but debases it by trying to intimidate individuals and groups. It does not strengthen the bonds of mutual respect and engagement that sustain a diverse community able to manage differences; it weakens them. If we shut out perspectives, if we silence voices, if we allow innuendo to substitute for reasoned exchange of ideas, if we listen only to those who already share our assumptions, truth gets lost, our intellectual climate is impoverished and our community is diminished.

Passionate debate is to be expected in a civil society, especially in a heated election season, but I am personally concerned any time people feel disrespected, intimidated or unfairly singled out because of their beliefs. Important issues will generate passions, even discomfort — that cannot be avoided. But if the political debate on campus gets more shrill and less nuanced, if hostility replaces empathy, if we see each other as enemies rather than as colleagues trying to figure out how to do the right thing in difficult circumstances, we will all be the lesser for it. It is possible to express strong opinions without belittling others.

Today I am calling on our Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs to explore how to better foster political dialogue that is respectful, productive and focused on understanding rather than division. UCLA faculty, students and staff deserve an open environment that encourages vigorous debate without disparagement.

Sincerely,

Gene D. Block
Chancellor