

## RESPONSE FROM VASSAR PRESIDENT HILL

*Via Email*

May 18, 2016

Dear Ms. Rossman-Benjamin:

Thank you for your recent letter on behalf of the 34 organizations. I appreciate your willingness to reach out on these important issues.

The well-being of our students is our ultimate concern at Vassar. We want all students who come here to know they are an essential part of our community, that they belong at Vassar, and that they will be treated with respect. This must be true, even when there are strong, deeply-held differences of opinion among students on important issues. This is the goal so many of our committed staff, faculty, and students work toward every day.

Vassar College as an institution, and I personally, have consistently and forcefully condemned anti-Semitism, and we will continue to do so. In word and in deed, including messages to our campus community, alumnae/i, and parents of students, I have stated unequivocally that anti-Semitism must be called out wherever it exists.

We have well-established processes and dedicated staff on our campus to investigate any charges of discrimination or harassment thoroughly and promptly, and assure that they are adjudicated swiftly and appropriately through our college regulations process. If a student or other member of our community is found to be responsible for discrimination, harassment or threat, that person will be disciplined accordingly. I, along with our faculty and staff, have consistently urged and worked with our students, should they ever feel they have been discriminated against, to use these processes fully.

Calling out anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination through this process is the most effective way we have to hold individuals accountable and make it clear to our students that we will not tolerate such behavior.

Obviously, anonymous postings on social media such as Yik Yak make it difficult to hold persons accountable in the same way. We cannot know whether such postings even come from our own community. These are among the serious challenges and harmful results of anonymous social media that all organizations and institutions face.

As I am certain you are aware, Vassar has consistently made its position against the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement known. The Dean of the Faculty and I rejected the American Studies Association call for a boycott of Israeli academic institutions, and I have on many occasions stated that Vassar does not support the BDS movement. That position against BDS did not change when our student government agreed to take up the BDS issue and as you know, in a referendum last month our students voted against supporting BDS.

At the same time, Vassar has a strong commitment to free speech and academic freedom. Those freedoms provide our students, faculty, and staff the right to hold and express their points of view and beliefs about the BDS movement.

There is no perfect model of how to have respectful conversations and dialogue among people who hold opposing, deeply felt opinions and beliefs. But I believe colleges and universities can, and must, rise to this challenge. We cannot solve the problems of our time unless we explore them together, and campuses should be places where we can face these complex and challenging issues in productive ways. This is an essential part of the education we must provide our students, if they are to contribute to a society that will be better equipped to address urgent problems than we are today.

It is critical for students to understand the impact of their words and actions on others, just as it is critical to learn how to compromise and work toward solutions. To that end, at Vassar we have made learning how to

have these challenging conversations a priority. We have held workshops on anti-Semitism with skilled facilitators and have engaged the highly regarded National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) for trainings on how to have respectful dialogue on difficult topics. Student leaders, faculty, and staff from throughout student services, as well as my senior staff and I, have worked with NCBI over the last year and a half.

Vassar has made a strong commitment to education and discussion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Speakers and panels this year – several of which were supported through the President's Office Fund for Dialogue and Engagement Across Differences -- included human rights activist Bassem Eid, who conveyed a cautionary message about BDS; journalist, author, and professor Peter Beinart on the "Crisis of Zionism"; legal scholar and former president of Brandeis University Frederick Lawrence via webcast on "Free Speech vs Hate Speech," followed by a faculty panel for audience discussion; author and activist Ari Shavit on "The Triumph and Tragedy of Israel"; a faculty panel entitled "Disciplinary Perspectives on Boycotts of Israel" with faculty from the psychology, history, and economics departments; and broadcast journalist Krista Tippett on "Creating Civility."

And we will not stop here. Our goal is to make a contribution not only to recruit and educate a highly qualified and diverse student body, but to help them learn and engage constructively across deep differences. Anti-Semitism, and all other forms of discrimination and harassment, will not be tolerated on our campus. We are equally dedicated to being able to hold tough conversations, and helping our students learn to listen and respect one another across their differences. This is a mission I believe we must all embrace, in order to create a future we will want to live in.

Catharine Hill, President

cc: William Plapinger, Chair of the Board of Trustees