

## President Melvin L. Oliver's Comments Read at the Pitzer College Council

November 29, 2018

I want to speak to the College Council as President of Pitzer College and to reflect on the motion advanced by the FEC and affirmatively voted upon by the faculty to suspend the direct-enroll program at Haifa University in Israel.

In Pitzer's Faculty, Staff and Student Governance Bylaws, "1.5(a): All matters relating to the educational policies of the College are subject to review by the faculty..." In the wisdom of the early founders of the College, it was recognized that the Faculty have the subject matter expertise and educational background to review curriculum and policy decisions that promote the educational objectives of the institution, advance our educational mission, and promote the well-being of our students.

I have listened to the arguments and observations made in support of this motion and frankly, I find that they show little or no consideration for our educational objectives and mission; in fact, I find the outcome of the discussion to be a repudiation of our educational mission. To deny Pitzer students who want to study at Haifa University the opportunity to study abroad and to enter into dialogue and promote intercultural understanding at the altar of political considerations is anathema to Pitzer's core values. If the suspension of the Haifa University program becomes a reality, this will be paltry support for the cause of Palestinian rights and a major blow to the reputation and reality of Pitzer College as a scholarly institution committed to its stated values of intercultural understanding and the ability of students to pursue their vision of educational engagement. This is inconsistent with Pitzer's core values and certainly not consistent with what a Pitzer education is all about.

Much was made of the supposed legal restrictions on "critics of Israeli policy" and "proponents of BDS" in being able to access study abroad opportunities in Israel. While the faculty was deliberating this motion, the case of the American graduate student Lara Alqasem who was detained and not allowed entry to pursue her program of study at Hebrew University was ongoing. However, the Israeli Supreme Court made a decision that decisively stated that her "political viewpoints" could not be used to deny her entry to the country and enrollment in Hebrew University. As the court said:

"Since the appellant's actions do not raise satisfactory cause to bar her entry to Israel, the inevitable impression is that invalidating the visa given to her was due to the political opinions she holds...If this is truly the case, then we are talking about an extreme and dangerous step, which could lead to the crumbling of the pillars upon which democracy in Israel stands."

This statement of support for individual political beliefs and the right to enter into Israeli society is in sharp relief to the US court's explicit support for denial of entry of Muslims from various countries around the world to the US. Are we ready to have other colleges and

universities ban their students from attending Pitzer College because of our national immigration laws?

Pitzer College, along with every college in the country, promotes exchanges and study abroad in countries with significant human right's abuses. China, for example, has killed, tortured, and imprisoned up to one million people in Tibet and utterly obliterated the Tibetan nation. Additionally, China currently has one million Muslims imprisoned in re-education camps. Why would we not suspend our program with China? Or take our longest standing program in Nepal where the Pitzer in Nepal program has been run for over 40 years. During that time they have had a bloody civil war that killed 19,000 people. Why Israel?

The faculty's action has already caused Pitzer College substantial and unnecessary damage by creating the impression that Pitzer is an illiberal place where its supposed core value of intercultural understanding is sacrificed on the altar of narrow and selectively applied political interests. If the motion is enacted, the damage will be much worse still. We will foolishly alienate a large percentage of our Jewish and non-Jewish constituents who see this very polarizing issue differently from the stance expressed in the faculty motion. Who are these constituents? Current and prospective students and their families; current, former, and prospective faculty and staff; alumni; trustees; and friends of the College. We do not have the luxury of isolating ourselves and alienating our friends. No one does. This decision has consequences; consequences that will over time limit our reach, adversely affect our ability to implement our academic goals such as research funding and innovative academic programming, and create a misleading impression of our campus community and alumni.

There is a tradition that Pitzer College needs to honor and to treasure. It is of the Pitzer that came into being at a time that Jewish faculty were few and far between at the Claremont Colleges. Many of Pitzer College's founding faculty were Jewish. Among them were Werner Warmbrunn and Lucian Marquis, both German Jews who fled Nazi Germany. Lucian's own father was arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis in Germany. As founding faculty, they were instrumental in forging a vision of Pitzer that attracted me, and I presume, many of you to Pitzer. I came here because the core values resonated with my beliefs and how I live my life. And I want Pitzer College to continue to be known for its appreciation of diverse political and social views. An institution where we attempt to understand social, economic, and political problems through the lens of intercultural understanding and where we engage with different communities, not superficially, but with depth and real critical appreciation. To do that we need to reject this restriction and double down on our engagement with communities we disagree with, whose political systems we decry, and where discrimination and bias are endemic. We have much to give as both individuals and a community and, equally, much to learn, and that is the educational mission that we need to preserve and protect.

Melvin L. Oliver  
President