

SENT VIA EMAIL

President Carol L. Folt
USC Office of the President
University of Southern California
Los Angeles, CA 90089-0012

February 17, 2022

Re: Letter from 1,446 individuals including hundreds of USC stakeholders urging equal and adequate protects for Zionist students

Dear President Folt, USC Board of Trustees, and Advisory Committee on Jewish Life Members:

We heartily commend you for acknowledging the anti-Zionist motivated harassment that Jewish and pro-Israel students have been experiencing at USC and for committing to take steps to address it, in part through the establishment of an Advisory Committee on Jewish Life.

As the Committee carries out its important charge, we strongly encourage its members to recognize that the core problem to be addressed is not so much the specific acts of harassment that students are experiencing – although these are indeed severe, persistent, and pervasive and have created a hostile environment for many students – but rather *the unfair and inadequate way that these acts have been addressed to date*. For instance, there is a strong sense among students, faculty and members of the Jewish community that had a USC graduate student's social media messages threatening to kill Zionists and cursing Jews been directed, instead, against another minority, the University would have responded far more promptly and vigorously to such threatening verbal harassment.

We believe that the source of this unacceptable double standard is USC's Policy on Prohibited Discrimination, Harassment, and Retaliation. Although it states at the outset that "all members of the university community should pursue their work, education, and engagement in University programs and activities in a safe environment," the policy only guarantees a "safe environment, free from discrimination and harassment" to some students and not all students.

While the list of protected groups in USC's policy is quite long, and many students will easily find their niche, Jewish students experiencing anti-Zionist motivated harassment do not naturally fit into a group that guarantees them protection. And non-Jewish pro-Israel students who fall victim to anti-Zionist harassment are never covered by the school's policy.

This distinction highlights a profound inequality not just for Jewish and non-Jewish pro-Israel students, but for many students on your campus: under USC's policy, the *exact same harmful behavior* will be either addressed or ignored by administrators, based solely on the identity of the student. Even more troubling, however, is the unequal treatment of students when it comes to freedom of speech and academic freedom. Although USC affirms its strong commitment to protecting all students' freedom of expression, an exception is carved out for the verbal harassment of only some groups, which is *not* considered free speech and will be subject to punishment. USC's policy justifies this, stating, "[W]hen harassment is committed against students...it threatens their academic freedom."

While we commend USC for rightly recognizing that harassing conduct *itself* suppresses its victim's self-expression, we are deeply disturbed that students who are not members of protected groups will not benefit from this recognition; their right to be protected from verbal harassment does *not* outweigh their harasser's right to free speech. This is a double whammy for pro-Israel students: not only are their harassers afforded free speech protection that is, in effect, license to continue verbally harassing them, but their *own* freedom of speech and academic freedom are diminished by the harassment.

Therefore, as your committee discusses ways to combat the harassment of Jewish and pro-Israel students, we urge you to acknowledge the gaping inequality between students in USC's harassment policy and its profound impact on student safety and freedom of expression. **And we encourage you to expand the school's policy to apply the same stringent standard of protection from harassment prescribed by federal and state law to all students.** *Every student deserves equal protection from harassing behavior that threatens their safety, squashes their self-expression and prevents them from fully participating in campus life, irrespective of their identity or the motivation of their harasser.*

We believe USC has an important opportunity here. Thank you for your leadership and your commitment to ensuring a campus climate where all students can thrive.

Sincerely,

The Undersigned **1,446 individuals**, which include **255 USC stakeholders*** (students, family of students, alumni, faculty, staff, donors):

(Names removed in online version)

See [Appendix](#) for sampling of individual comments from signatories