

Monday, March 3, 2025



Dear Committee Members,

I am submitting this testimony as a member of Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) Baltimore, is a national grassroots Jewish organization in support of Palestinian rights with over 10,000 supporters in Maryland, as well as chapters in Baltimore, the DC Metro area, and at University of Maryland College Park. I am a resident of Baltimore City and District 41. I am testifying in **strong opposition to SB0847, the Maryland Campus Accountability and Modernization to Protect University Students Act.**

If passed, SB0847 would codify into law policies restricting free speech on campus. This bill will chill the vital exchange of ideas on campuses in Maryland. Laws such as these have been applied in biased ways across the United States in retaliation against nonviolent student activists speaking out in solidarity with Palestine.

This legislation is clearly in line with the Trump-led repression of civil society, universities, and social justice movements and would only **further the restriction of free speech and political dissent.** Although the bill purports to address a range of discriminatory speech acts, its structure, tactics, and timing clearly link it to the repressive policies that have been pushed at universities and colleges across the US in the last year in response to pro-Palestine and anti-war activism.

Time/place/manner restrictions such as those included in this bill create an onerous and confusing process that discourages student activists from exercising their free speech rights. It creates opportunities for students engaging in disfavored speech to be punished for minor technical violations. It hopefully goes without saying that creating tightly controlled "free speech zones" in which students are permitted to exercise their

constitutional rights is a horrendous hypocrisy and not remotely consistent with actual freedoms of speech and assembly.

Requirements that all institutions commit to involving security or law enforcement for political expression that causes self-defined “significant disruption” are the wrong direction for Maryland. The requirement to involve police or campus is escalatory and prohibits using de-escalatory methods, like liaisons from the dean of students / student life office, who are often much more effective. It also brings to mind horrific past events in America’s history, such as the killings of students at Kent State. Involving law enforcement officers in peaceful student protests has already led to the terrorization and detention of student activists in the past year. This should by no means be encouraged, let alone enshrined in law.

In recent years, pro-Palestine speech has been repressed at unprecedented rates through biased applications of hate speech and anti-discrimination laws and policies. The Hate-Bias report central to this bill’s reporting requirements and enforcement is not a comprehensive picture of the experiences of marginalized people in Maryland since discrimination and attacks on Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian communities are under-reported and under-recognized.

College is the place where - perhaps for the first time - we encounter people who disagree with us in fundamental ways. Although this can be uncomfortable, this discomfort is not a threat that needs to be addressed through government repression. Instead, this discomfort is part of the education process of confronting views other than our own, and learning to tolerate and protect it is crucial to maintaining a democratic society in which freedom of speech and peaceful assembly are sacred.

Finally, the University of Maryland has announced large budget cuts based on the Governor’s budget. Cuts to the budget of Maryland’s flagship academic institution shows that **the FY2026 budget cannot afford this \$500,000 allocation**. Passing and funding this bill would mean **taking money from academic programs to suppress students’ freedom of speech**.

It is for all these reasons that I am encouraging you to **strongly oppose to SB0847, the Maryland Campus Accountability and Modernization to Protect University Students Act**.

Thank you for your time, service, and consideration.

Sincerely,
Dr. Katherine Blaha
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