

## OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

*Williams » Office of the President » Writings and Remarks » Letters from the President » Campus vigil on Israel and Gaza, and the college president's role in the wake of world crises*

# Campus vigil on Israel and Gaza, and the college president's role in the wake of world crises

October 12, 2023

Williams students, faculty and staff,

As many of you are aware, I have not issued a public statement on behalf of the College in the days following the recent, horrific attacks by Hamas on Israelis and the deaths of Palestinian civilians in the military retaliation. I have heard from members of the community that the college's silence in the face of these events is itself a statement, and an unacceptable one.

I am writing now to invite everyone to join me at a campus vigil, and then to explain my view on college statements and the reasons I no longer issue them, except in regards to events that directly impact our mission and work as a college.

Before I do so, I want to encourage you to please come to the [vigil](#)

organized by our chaplains at 8 PM next Monday, October 16, on the steps of Chapin Hall. The event, subtitled Lament and Reflection on Events in Israel and Gaza, will be a time for all to mourn our collective losses and help each other through a moment of grief and outrage. I want to thank the students from WCJA who worked with Jewish Chaplain Rabbi Seth Wax to host a related gathering earlier this week, and Muslim Chaplain Sidra Mahmood, who will be holding space for the Williams Muslim community later this week.

In regards to my view on institutional statements, the following is a version of the explanation I offered at yesterday's Faculty Meeting:

My policy not to send out campus-wide messages about domestic or international events or even natural disasters, no matter how tragic or painful, is based on several considerations:

First and foremost, terrible tragedies and injustices occur too frequently in life. Our awareness of specific events may vary depending on our communities, personal connections and the media's focus. But such events are constantly affecting people from Williams, their families and innocent victims around the world—sometimes on a very large scale. I put out no statement after the many—too many—incidents of recent times: Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the displacement of Armenian Christians from Nagorno-Karabakh, the earthquakes in Turkey and Afghanistan, and terrible events in Sudan, Burkina Faso and Ethiopia, to name just some examples. We think with grief, too, of the many shootings at schools and places of worship. Each of you will have injustices that you could add to this list. We should each have the chance to decide which of these affect us and how we want to contend with them.

Second, I believe that our most important mission is to teach students how to think, and empower them to do so for themselves—not to tell them what to think. Faculty will be engaging in such work in classes across the curriculum, and staff, too will contribute. We will have future learning opportunities for the whole community, as well.

Third, the decision reflects my ongoing concern over the role of a college president. When I speak as president of Williams, I am speaking on behalf of thousands of people who together make up “the Williams community.” I feel it is both right and necessary for me to do so on topics related to our core educational mission. But when the topics are national and world events—even events that affect us personally, and on which we feel great moral clarity—I do not believe it is the president’s job to speak for the whole community, or even that it is possible to do so. In those moments, my job is to help ensure that the educational opportunities and personal support are in place so that we can reflect, study and decide what we think and believe, individually and collectively.

This position represents an evolution in my thinking. Earlier in my presidency I sent out public statements about various world events. After conversations with members of our community and colleagues at other schools, I have become convinced that such communications do more harm than good. They support some members of our community in particular moments while intentionally or unintentionally leaving out others. They give some issues great visibility while leaving others unseen. As president of Williams I want to focus my energy on caring for students in the moments that are important to you, by working with our incredible faculty and staff who to provide learning opportunities, support and mentorship.

Over time there will undoubtedly be campus teach-ins, speakers and

classroom discussions to help us think about the causes and effects of conflict in the Middle East. Right now, I suspect the grief is too raw for many of us to intellectualize. If you are feeling that way, I encourage you to seek support from the Chaplains, Integrative Wellbeing, the deans, OIDEI and others. I encourage departments and offices to share your own resources in the days to come, too.

What I hope we can do, in this moment, is join together as a community, offer or seek comfort, and try to enact our shared commitment to reducing violence, suffering and injustice in this world—one that we inhabit together.


Maud S. Mandel  
President, Williams College

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