



**Middle  
East  
Studies  
Association**  
of North America, Inc.

1957 E Street NW, Suite 401  
Washington, DC 20052

Phone 520-333-2577

Fax 520-207-3166

caf@mesana.org

mesana.org



8 December 2023

Robert C. Robbins  
President, University of Arizona  
president@email.arizona.edu

Dear President Robbins,

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA) and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express our concern about how the University of Arizona College of Education has handled classroom complaints directed at two members of its faculty, Rebecca Lopez, Assistant Professor of Practice, and Rebecca Zapien, Community Liaison in Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies. Lopez and Zapien were placed on administrative leave following student complaints about discussions they led in two of their courses on Israel's military campaign in Gaza, which, as of 7 December 2023, is [reported](#) to have caused the deaths of at least 16,248 Palestinians, about 70 per cent of whom are women or children. The College of Education's handling of this matter is likely to exert a chilling effect on classroom conversations concerning Palestine and Israel, and thus contravenes the principles of academic freedom.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the prestigious *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 2,800 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and outside of North America.

On 31 October and 3 November 2023, Lopez led a series of conversations concerning the conflict in Palestine/Israel, addressing in particular the significance of the massive death toll incurred by Palestinian children and adolescents in Gaza, as part of two courses, "Structured English Immersion" (TLS 416) and "Cultural Pluralism for Young Children" (TLS 411). On 1 November 2023, Lopez and Zapien led a conversation together in a class session of TLS 411. Conversations concerning events in the news and their relevance to course content, with both students and faculty making class presentations, were a regular part of the curriculum of both courses. These conversations featured in a part of the course called "Media Watch," in which class discussions were oriented to the relevance of current events to questions of diversity and the sociocultural context of education. Following these conversations a small number of students filed complaints with the university's Office of Institutional Equity. After this office investigated the complaints and decided against



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opening an investigation, the College of Education placed Lopez and Zapien on administrative leave while it conducted its own investigation.

While they were on leave, selectively and tendentiously edited recordings of class discussions featuring Zapien, Lopez and students in the course were posted to social media outlets that advocated in favor of Israeli actions in Gaza. Because the instructors never consented to these recordings or their dissemination, the students' action may constitute a violation of University of Arizona policy. Nonetheless, the College of Education used these edited recordings in its investigation of Zapien and Lopez. That investigation made no finding of wrongdoing on their part and both Lopez and Zapien have been taken off administrative leave, but the College has not allowed them to finish teaching courses this quarter. Moreover, in order to remain in good standing, they have been required to complete a set of additional training activities not required of other instructional staff. Faculty should of course be given access to the training and mentorship necessary to navigate difficult classroom conversations, but the imposition of this requirement on Lopez and Zapien appears to be punitive. Finally, the College has made no statement condemning the posting of classroom recordings to social media, even though neither students nor instructors consented to these recordings or their dissemination.

In these fraught times university leaders have a heightened responsibility to protect the freedom of speech, academic freedom and physical safety of all members of the campus community. This country's institutions of higher education should be places in which a broad range of perspectives can be expressed, debated and criticized, in the classroom and outside it. Regrettably, the College of Education's actions in this matter have not conformed to the University of Arizona's avowed commitment to respecting and protecting free speech and academic freedom, and they undermine the ability of faculty to have frank and productive discussions with their students.

We therefore call upon you to immediately facilitate the return of Zapien and Lopez to their full teaching responsibilities and rescind the requirement that they participate in additional training and mentorship. We also urge you to publicly denounce the recording of classroom conversations without consent. Finally, we urge you to vigorously and publicly reiterate your commitment to protect the safety and well-being of all members of the University of Arizona community and to defend their constitutionally protected right to free speech as well as their academic freedom.



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We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aslı Ü. Bâli'.

Aslı Ü. Bâli

MESA President

Professor, Yale Law School

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand'.

Laurie Brand

Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom

Professor Emerita, University of Southern California