

Professors Ernst and Tamari,

Campus organizations occasionally seek modest financial support for conferences, and I try to provide that support from the School of Government whenever possible primarily in an effort to be a good citizen of the campus community. We don't have time to investigate the details of the programs seeking our support. Our support has been based on a basic trust that other members of our community will take responsibility for insuring that their programs are aligned with the University's accepted norms and values. That trust always has been honored-until now.

I recognize that a conference about Gaza is controversial by its nature, and I believe strongly that the University should not shy away from controversial topics. I was criticized before the conference for supporting it at all. The person believed that the presenters included people who had made anti-Semitic remarks in the past and that anti-Semitism would be a part of this conference. I naively assumed that you would be extraordinarily careful in conducting the conference to insure that anti-Semitism was not encouraged. I somehow had missed the reports about the conference and assumed that it had not been controversial. I even received a thank-you note from Professor Tamari saying that the "participants engaged in dialogue to build understanding related to the Gaza Strip." She made no mention of the deeply offensive musical performance that was a part of the conference or the ensuing controversy, and so I felt blindsided on Friday when I was copied on Dean Brinkley's email about the Law School's sponsorship and subsequently heard from a faculty colleague who was deeply disturbed by the School's sponsorship.

When you solicited my support, you indicated that the conference would "feature Gazan culture: music, food, and art, in order to showcase the beauty (emphasis added), alongside the challenges, of life in the Gaza Strip." I don't know what happened during the other sessions, but the musical performance by a Palestinian rapper<<https://www.aish.com/jw/s/Open-Anti-Semitism-at-UNC-and-Duke-Conference.html>> was plainly and disturbingly anti-Semitic. You promised to feature music that would "showcase the beauty" of the Gaza Strip. At a time when we need to be especially sensitive to promoting a more inclusive environment at Carolina, you showcased a controversial performer who did exactly the opposite. After he told the audience "I cannot be anti-Semitic alone," it was incredibly offensive to see the attendees at your conference enthusiastically singing along with him. The mood was celebratory. Given his deeply offensive comments, I would have expected his hateful speech to be met with stunned silence. Instead, the reaction of the audience can only be described as enthusiastically anti-Semitic. You claimed after the event that the video "misconstrued the breadth of discourse that took place during the panels." I was not there, but the behavior of your audience during the performance makes me skeptical about your claim. As the organizers, who I assume were present during the performance, I would have expected you to intervene and stop a performance that so obviously and painfully contravened campus norms and values, and that so undercut the cultural understanding that you claimed to promote.

I want to be clear that I am not writing because the conference tried to address a controversial topic, or because an academic on a panel put forward a controversial idea. You invited an anti-Semitic performer who engaged in hateful speech as a part of his performance, and who contributed to a climate of intolerance. So far as I can tell, you did nothing at the time to stop it and you said nothing at the time to reject it. In your carefully crafted media response after the offensive musical performance, you said "[c]onferences such as this are organized by scholars who have academic freedom to develop the programming and invite their selected speakers and performers." It simply is wrong to defend this explicitly anti-Semitic performance under the cloak of academic freedom. It crossed a bright line and you should have the integrity to reject it and take responsibility for it.

What's to be done now that the conference is over?

First, I'm including my colleagues at the School on this email for several reasons. Most of them may not know about the conference or the School's sponsorship of it. They deserve to know. I apologize for associating the School's name with such an offensive performance. I apologize for any pain it may have caused. I reject it completely and it is entirely at odds with the School's culture and values. It is extremely unlikely that I will agree to sponsor another program that is not connected with the School in some significant way. I don't want to rule it out completely, but any future sponsorship will only happen if there is good reason to believe that it will be aligned with our values. Unfortunately given our limited ability to look into these kinds of programs, it likely means that we will not be a future sponsor.

Second, I'm formally asking Professors Ernst and Tamari to do two things: (1) remove the School of Government as a sponsor from your website about the conference if that hasn't already happened, and (2) return the \$500 that we contributed. It may seem symbolic at this point, but symbolism matters. I do not want the School associated with the anti-Semitic performance that now has come to define your conference. I trusted that your conference would conform to the values of the University, and instead you violated that trust by extending a platform to an anti-Semitic musician who hurt members of our community. It was not part of an academic dialogue. It may seem that removing our sponsorship and returning our contribution is too little, too late. I agree, but it is at least something. Please confirm that you are complying with my two requests.

Mike