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News

Outsiders Respond To Ad Hoc Report

Organizations From NYCLU to the David Project Criticize Committee's Findings and Procedures in MEALAC Debate

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The March 31st report on the controversy surrounding Middle East studies had some strong words for outside organizations that have inserted themselves into the debate, but that hasn't kept those organizations silent.

In the week and a half since the release of the ad hoc faculty committee's report on students' allegations of classroom intimidation, groups from the David Project to the New York Civil Liberties Union have responded with a mixture of criticism and spin.

While the content of their reactions has varied widely, the uniform intensity with which they have responded indicates how firmly the issue has been seized by outsiders and how unlikely it is that they will let up.

The Boston-based pro-Israel advocacy group the David Project, which documented many of the complaints in its film *Columbia Unbecoming*, has made some of the most severe criticisms of the report, which devoted most of its 24 pages to a harsh scrutiny of the University's inadequate grievance channels.

Charles Jacobs, the president of the David Project, said the committee failed to address the issue of whether certain MEALAC professors teach lies or propaganda in the classroom.

The committee was instructed by University President Lee Bollinger to investigate only specific claims of inappropriate conduct, not to assess the numerous claims of what many students and outsiders see as a heavy pro-Palestinian bias in the MEALAC department. But Jacobs insisted that it was more than just an issue of politics, referring to a claim made by a student in *Columbia Unbecoming* that Professor Joseph Massad had characterized Zionism as a macho movement because, Massad allegedly said, the word "Zion"

means “penis.” (The Hebrew word “zion” actually means a road sign or a designated place. “Zayin” is the Hebrew word for penis.)

“This is not a case of his personal point of view that may make people unsettled,” Jacobs said. “This is an anti-Semitic and incendiary defamation. So the fact that the committee refused to ask the questions of what’s a lie and what’s truth and what’s propaganda—but instead, by comfortably avoiding that, cast all of that in the language of psychology and pedagogy—just shows that they avoided the main topics.”

Jacobs also blasted the committee for its treatment of the specific complaints.

“They only investigated three cases, and we know there were many, many cases,” he said.

Students in Columbians for Academic Freedom, a group which has spoken in defense of the students who lodged complaints about the MEALAC department, have also voiced strong disapproval of the committee’s decision to address just three incidents in its report. Ira Katznelson, the professor who chaired the five-member committee, has responded by saying the committee assessed all of the complaints brought before it and addressed the three instances it found most serious.

Meanwhile, the NYCLU, which for months has publicly supported the accused professors, sent a letter to Bollinger at the end of last week expressing general support for the committee’s findings but also criticizing its methods of assessing witnesses’ credibility. The committee found an instance in which Massad allegedly threatened to throw a student out of his class to be credible and in violation of the norms of faculty responsibility.

“None of the safeguards that ensure credibility of witnesses were present in the committee’s processes,” said Donna Lieberman, the executive director of the NYCLU. “It heard from volunteers only. It didn’t conduct any information that would have elicited information from disinterested parties. There was no cross-examination.”

The NYCLU also accused the committee of failing to recognize the ideological agenda of the students making the complaints and their supporters.

“In assessing the evidence that was presented to it, the committee failed to take into account the interest of its witnesses in a certain political outcome,” Lieberman said. “The students have produced a film that is funded by the David Project. It makes no bones about its political agenda.”

While the political nature of the David Project is not in question, the students have vehemently denied that they are motivated by politics, saying they are fighting classroom intimidation of all types and that they only teamed up with the David Project because they were unable to make their complaints heard within the University.

And Jacobs himself took issue with the charge, made implicitly by the committee and explicitly by many Columbia faculty members in recent public comments, that groups like the David Project represent a threat

to academic freedom or professorial autonomy.

“The opposite is true,” he said. “We were asked to help the students where long-standing complaints were festering. The University failed to do anything, and nothing would have happened without that movie. Nothing.”

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, which has expressed support for the students raising complaints, also responded to the report last week.

David French, the foundation’s president, called the report “singularly uninformative,” because, he said, “you don’t need a committee to tell you that corroborated reports of classroom misbehavior were credible.”

French also said the committee’s records and evidence should be available to the public.

“Because there was a lack of transparency, you have to take the committee’s word that there was no evidence of anti-Semitism.”

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