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Open Letter to the UC Community

I write today to address, once again, the moral and ethical imperative for all of our University of California students, faculty and staff members to foster a climate of tolerance, civility and open-mindedness. I am prompted to do so because of a number of recent incidents that undermine this imperative.

University campuses are proper venues for collisions of ideas and viewpoints. Conflicting viewpoints not only are inevitable but also healthy in this context.

What is not acceptable are acts meant to disrupt the speech of others. What is not acceptable are hate-driven physical and, yes, verbal attacks on any group or individual that are meant to silence or intimidate those who would express differing opinions.

It was wrong for hecklers to disrupt speakers on the UC Davis campus at an event entitled "Israeli Soldiers Speak Out." It was reprehensible that one of these hecklers accused the speakers of being associated with rapists and murders. Under the direction of Chancellor Katehi, campus officials dealt appropriately with this individual, moving him out of the room and barring re-entry. But I want to make this clear: I condemn the actions of those who would disrupt this event. Attempting to shout down speakers is not protected speech. It is an action meant to deny others their right to free speech.

It was wrong for a vandal or vandals on the UC Riverside campus to deface the Israeli flag displayed by the Jewish student organization Hillel, scrawling the word "terrorists" across it. I applaud Chancellor White for his rapid and vigorous condemnation of this cowardly act. And I join him whole-heartedly in that condemnation. The chancellor was right to assign campus police to investigate. Two years ago, at UC San Diego, it was African Americans who were vilified by words and images that mocked their heritage and who felt threatened by the hanging of a noose. Around the same time, derogatory and profane words were

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spray-painted across the entrance to the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Resource Center at UC Davis. Likewise, swastikas scrawled on campus walls or doors have made Jewish students feel unsafe.

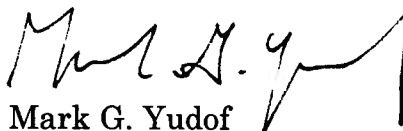
Since then, among other initiatives, the system's central office has worked with the campuses and various groups, including students, to revise policies on student conduct; the new provisions strengthen prohibitions on threatening conduct and acts motivated by bias, including religious bias. We also are working with the Museum of Tolerance and the Anti-Defamation League to improve campus climate for all students and to take full advantage of our marvelous diversity.

Still, despite diligent efforts, we cannot say – and, realistically, never will be able to say – that hateful incidents won't occur in a community made up of 235,000 students and 185,000 employees. There inevitably will be speakers or forums that present ideas others will view as hateful and abhorrent. Hateful incidents will not be tolerated and I stand ready to condemn them whenever and wherever they occur, as should all members of the UC community.

As for incendiary speakers, we cannot as a society allow what we regard as vile speech to lead us to abandon the cherished value of free speech. But the same Constitution that permits some public figures to engage in hateful commentary also protects my right and duty – and your right and duty – to condemn these merchants of hatred when they come into our community. Again, the best remedy for bad speech is to surround it with good speech.

Finally, it is important that we keep our eyes on the prize. What we collectively are trying to preserve is a vibrant and vocal university community that is not afraid to explore or even argue about ideas, that is not afraid to make stands on controversial issues, that is not afraid of discourse, but one that embraces the ethic of doing so in a spirit of respect and civility.

With our Chancellors, I remain committed to the principle of balancing protection of free speech and promoting strategies to foster an environment where all students, faculty, staff members and guests can feel safe and respected – no matter their individual characteristics or viewpoints.



Mark G. Yudof
President