

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## *Now Is the Time for Administrators to Embrace Neutrality*

*The Israel-Hamas war might finally show colleges the virtues of  
the Kalven Report.*

*By Jeffrey Flier  
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Last Saturday, the world was shaken by news that fighters from Gaza had crossed the border with Israel and slaughtered many civilians — women, children, the aged — in the most horrific manner. On college campuses, these events activated rapid reactions linked to widely divergent views of the underlying conflict between Israel and Palestinians. Political and religious differences between the involved parties and observers have made the conflict even more resistant to peaceful solutions.

Disputes arising from geopolitical crises occur in numerous social settings, but colleges are especially vulnerable. First, campuses by their nature are (or should be) spaces for robust debate on contested topics, strongly protected by free-speech norms. Second, students and faculty represent diverse nationalities, religions, cultures, and belief systems. Third, college leaders are expected by many to express opinions on political and social issues on behalf of the institution.

This last practice is complex, and increasingly [contested](#). The central mission of colleges is to serve as communities for discovery, improvement, and the transmission of knowledge. By fulfilling these roles, they play a critical role in the evolution of the social and political values of the societies in which they exist. Faculty are the key producers of this work, coordinated by administrative leaders who organize and facilitate the many complex

activities required to carry out the mission. The extent to which college leaders should, in addition to their administrative roles, express institutional positions on contestable social and political issues is a matter of legitimate dispute. At one pole are the sentiments expressed in the [1967 Kalven Committee report](#) of the University of Chicago, which argues for “a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political or social issues of the day ... not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity ... but out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints.” Exceptions should be made only for situations that “threaten the very mission of the university and its values of free inquiry”

At the other pole, now more common, college leaders are expected to issue statements on behalf of the institution on a variety of current political issues, for instance those related to sex and gender, racism, abortion, global warming and its remedies, regional conflicts, and so on. Such statements clearly please many people on campus. But — often less visibly — [they disturb others](#), especially those who hold legitimate alternative views and object to assertions of a single institutional position on the issue in question.

How do these two approaches play out in the context of the current turmoil in Israel and Gaza? In institutions that boast well-articulated principles of institutional neutrality, no one should expect the president or deans to speak on behalf of the college on the recent events, not because they don't personally have strong views, but because it is not seen as their role as leaders to do so. Of course, faculty and students — the heart of the university — are expected to express their views in many formats and venues, protected by freedom of speech and by academic freedom. Those expressions are subject to criticism by those who disagree but should be protected from criticism that morphs into threats or harassment.

In institutions lacking articulated policies on institutional neutrality, such as Harvard, where I have been on the faculty since 1978, the situation is quite different. Institutional leaders are increasingly expected to issue statements

on behalf of the university on an array of issues. They do so because they think this is the right thing to do, because they are pressured to do so by a subset of the community that favors the position being articulated, or some combination of these. In such environments, leaders will be — and should be — evaluated in part on which issues they choose to respond to, and how they state their views.

This week a group of 30 Harvard student organizations issued a statement prominently claiming that Israel was exclusively responsible for the murder of Israelis by Hamas. At the same time, the groups failed to condemn the horrific actions of Hamas fighters. This statement was widely disseminated by news and social media. In the absence of any official response from the university, the statement risked looking like it represented the views of Harvard itself.

On the evening of October 9, after receiving much negative feedback on their silence, the president and the deans of all Harvard schools sent out a blast email to faculty, students, and alumni criticizing Hamas but refraining from calling their actions “terrorism.” They didn’t mention the student groups’ statement at all. I had already become involved in drafting a faculty open [letter](#), which was initially circulated to limited numbers of professors on October 10, gaining more than 300 signatures over the ensuing 24 hours. The letter made clear that in our view war crimes had been perpetrated, criticized the statement from the Harvard student groups, and asked the university to consider issuing its own statement to the same effect. On the same day, President Claudine Gay placed an [additional statement](#) on the university website stating that she “condemn[ed] the terrorist atrocities perpetrated by Hamas” as “abhorrent” and that the student groups (whose words she did not quote) did not speak for “Harvard University or its leadership.”

Several additional events are worthy of note. Over the past several days, some signatories of the student letter have been doxed, including by a truck driving around Harvard Square with pictures and names of some of those involved. Others may have received explicit threats of various kinds.

Several student groups withdrew their initial support for the letter, and several individual students publicly stated that they never saw the statement their group signed on to, didn't agree with it, and consequently resigned from the group. To the extent that any students who signed or issued the student letter received harassment or threats, they must be protected and their harassers must be subject to punishment by the university.

Where does this leave a faculty member who strongly supports free speech and academic freedom and favors a policy of institutional neutrality on political and social issues? First, I assert that both students and faculty must be accorded the freedom to speak on contentious issues, even — and perhaps most importantly — when some or most members of the community view their positions as offensive and wrong. To be meaningful, this freedom must be accorded to all members of the community, whatever the issues, unless their speech represents harassment and threats by objective criteria. Of course, the campus would be best served if disagreements led to respectful engagement with those holding different views, rather than angry and often ad hominem battles that produce no insights for either side or the public at large.

But since Harvard and its schools have repeatedly issued statements of institutional positions and values on diverse topics, the absence of an institutional response to the savage killing and hostage-taking of Israeli civilians (as well as Americans and others) combined with the initial failure to repudiate the student group statement, sent an unavoidable and objectionable — if unintended — message about Harvard's moral priorities. Those concerns were substantially addressed in a [video](#) that President Gay sent last evening to the Harvard community.

Whatever the course of the conflict in Israel over the coming months and years, the issue of free speech, academic freedom, and institutional neutrality will continue to be debated in universities in the U.S. and around the world, rising to public attention as new crises and political disputes take center stage. For the many institutions that haven't yet adopted institutional

neutrality, doing so will require thoughtful consideration by leadership and boards similar to that of the Kalven Committee at the University of Chicago in 1967. A recent statement by the newly installed president of Stanford University suggests that this approach may soon be instituted there. I hope the events at Harvard might lead our new president to consider a similar path. This would reduce the focus on what presidents, provosts, and deans say on specific political and social issues, and leave it to the community of scholars and students to deal — hopefully in a respectful way — with the conflicts that will always be with us.

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