



After hearing from our senators and the wider community of graduate students, The Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) feels compelled to respond to recent events on campus, and the subsequent response by Virginia Tech. First and foremost, the GPSS would like to express our support to the faculty, students, staff, and all other community members who took part in the *peaceful* protests from April 26th to April 29th, 2024. The GPSS is fully committed to securing and fighting for university members' First Amendment Rights to free speech and assembly. While we acknowledge that the university is bestowed some exceptional privileges to limit "time, place, and manner" of assemblies and speech acts, a university is only allowed to enact these restrictions if they "(a) are reasonable, (b) are justified without reference to the content of the regulated speech, (c) are narrowly tailored to serve a significant governmental interest, and (d) leave open ample alternative channels for communication of the information"[\[4\]](#).

The GPSS has been supportive of a variety of peaceful protests taking place on campus, having supported the Graduate Labor Union and the United Campus Worker's rally for a living wage in September 2023, and the protests over reports of sexual assault at Virginia Tech in September 2021 [\[7\]](#) among others to name a few. To the best of our knowledge, *none of these preceding events had permits and yet no arrests were made.*

Further, we know that, like these other gatherings, the anti-genocide protest was peaceful due to the heavy video and photographic documentation as well as the presence of the Virginia Appalachian Justice Chapter National Lawyers Guild (*see attached report, [10]*). It is concerning that this event would be characterized as dangerous, uncivil, or unlawful to justify the use of armed police officers and silencing of university and community members. This protest was taking place outdoors, was not interfering with regular university business, and was being conducted by students who were enrolled and paying tuition to the university. While safety is always important for all students, *fear should not be manufactured to enhance public approval and institutional perception retroactively.*

In an open letter to university presidents, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) states that "schools must not single out particular viewpoints for censorship, discipline, or *disproportionate punishment*"[\[2\]](#). The University's choice to escalate and arrest 82 peaceful protesters is a "disproportionate punishment." Protestors on the GLC lawn were peaceful and respectful, and we reject the characterization of "uncivil behavior" [\[11\]](#) during this protest. To suggest this implies a bias towards specific viewpoints and moreover constitutes a **grievous affront** to the ethos of peaceful protest upheld by the community at large.

Thus, we, first and foremost, call upon Virginia Tech to **(1) unconditionally drop the criminal charges against all 82 participants**. Dropping the charges is a necessary first step in de-escalating the situation and facilitating meaningful dialog. We recognize that this is an incredibly difficult situation to navigate, however, it is imperative that the university also takes responsibility for its choices and takes meaningful steps to de-escalate.

In addition to dropping all criminal charges, the GPSS stands with its historical support of the Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement, something that the GPSS has worked towards since the GPSS Resolution 2021-22N3 [\[8\]](#). We have a moral and ethical obligation in what companies we choose to do business with and maintain that it is reasonable to scrutinize and inquire about the university's donors and investments— particularly when they are supporting actors outside of the commonwealth as a land grant institution whilst doing so. At the bare minimum, the GPSS **(2) calls for Virginia Tech to have financial transparency regarding the investments held by the Virginia Tech Foundation**.

Furthermore, we must address Virginia Tech's silence on the rampant anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia on campus. GPSS broadly denounces racism, national identity and religious discrimination in all forms, however we feel compelled to point out that up to this point the University has failed to address the problems that Palestinian students are currently experiencing. It is in response to this that we ask the university to: **(3) Establish a working group that must include Palestinians and those organizing the protests to better define anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia**.

Finally, the GPSS asserts that criticizing state sanctioned violence, and Virginia Tech's funding ties to state sanctioned violence is not anti-semitic, on the contrary it sets a dangerous precedent if we give nations a free pass and *do not* call out human rights violations.

The university is at the crossroads where it can send a resolute message that it does not align with individuals advocating genocidal ideologies [\[1, 3, 5-6, 9\]](#) - or remain silent and show its complicity with the oppressor. We have an obligation to call out clear human rights violations: **not speaking out against clear human rights violations is tantamount to endorsement and casts the victims as lesser**. We urge the university to accept our three calls to action. We ask this in the spirit of becoming a better, more educated and welcoming community. **Now more than ever, the world needs Hokies to be empathetic, compassionate, and understanding**.

Sincerely,

The Graduate and Professional Student Senate

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