

Academic Freedom at Chicago's Columbia College: Association of University Professors Backs Iymen Chehade

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[American Association of University Professors \(AAUP\)](#) Illinois statement of support for Iymen Chehade, a professor at Chicago's Columbia College, marks the latest, and most significant, step forward in the fight against pervasive attempts to control discourse on Occupied Palestine, via stifling academic freedom on college and university campuses.

Chehade, employed by Columbia since 2007, has taught three different courses on the Middle East, but by far most popular has been his Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, a course he designed in 2010.

"The class is popular on campus. Students hear about it from other students and try consistently enroll in it," says Chehade. "Its one of those history classes that is not history, it's actually present, its also future. As we are speaking, history is being made."

Considerable student demand for the course led to Chehade's teaching three sections of it at one point. As of fall 2013, Columbia offered Chehade two sections to his Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.

As part of his course content in fall 2013, Chehade showed his students the award-winning documentary 5 Broken Cameras.

"The film itself is about the occupation of the village of Bil'in, the occupation of Palestine. My objective in showing the film was to humanize the issue," says Chehade. "Student reaction was very positive."

In spite of student demand for the course and student interest in the documentary, not long after showing it in his class, one of Chehade's two spring 2014 sections was canceled.

"I received an email from the Chair's office saying that they wanted to speak to me about an issue. Before going his office, I checked my mailbox and saw I'd been assigned two sections of the course for spring 2014."

At Chair Steven Corey's office, Chehade was told a student had complained of "bias" in his class. The student's identity was not revealed, nor was Chehade able to discuss the allegation with the student. Corey instructed Chehade to be "more balanced" in his class, and asked him to produce his teaching qualifications, a request Chehade says is not in itself unusual. "But in the context of the situation, that makes it alarming."

The week following the meeting with Corey, Chehade's two sections were posted for Columbia's spring 2014 offerings. Yet, within a couple of hours, one section of the course was eliminated, in violation of his contract with Columbia.

Chehade took the matter to the union, who brought the cancellation up with administration. "So they gave me another class," says Chehade. "The class was The Middle East Up To Mohammad, which is 1400 years ago, 1300 hundred years removed from when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict began."

According to Academic Vice President and Provost Louise Love, the college supported Chehade's showing of the film, which she lauded as "widely acclaimed" and noted provided "an important perspective." However, in her statement, she went on to note that the elimination of sections "reflect a multitude of factors such as overall student enrollment, targets for average class size."

"If their objective was to reduce classes, and increase class sizes, why did they give me a different class?" asks Chehade. "Whether they like the film or not is not the issue. Eliminating the opportunity for a professor to teach his perspective is the issue here. That's exactly what they did."

Since the sudden cancellation of his section, support has grown rapidly for the professor and for the larger issue of academic freedom. Chehade and the AAUP Illinois Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure maintain that the cancellation was an act of academic stifling.

"We have over 6000 signatures on [our petition](#) for academic freedom," says Chehade. Signatories include supporters from around the world, as well as Columbia faculty, current and former students, and academics nation-wide. "Many people have volunteered their time on this campaign. Students for Justice in Palestine and Jewish Voices for Peace at Columbia College have been very active in bringing this issue to light."

Regarding the cancellation, one former student, Alex Quiroz, notes: "I took this class knowing absolutely nothing about the conflict. Professor Chehade explained everything in a balanced and honest way. It would not be fair to other students who want to take this class."

Noting the impact of pro-Israeli lobby efforts on college and university campuses nationwide, Jewish-American Peter Cohen, signs "I find it unacceptable that a small, extremist and highly moneyed lobby that claims to represent my interests be allowed stifle legitimate voices and opinions in academia."

Love, herself, has been at the heart of prior incidents repressing academics. Notably, in 2006, as the associate provost at Roosevelt university, Love supported Susan Weininger (then Chair of the Department of History, Art History, and Philosophy) in her firing of World Religions professor Douglas Giles.

"Weininger was upset with him over for allowing his students to have this open forum," says Chehade, noting that [it has been publically documented that](#) Weininger said to Giles, "What disturbs me is that you act like Palestinians have a side in this. They don't have a side...they are animals...they are not civilized."

Love in turn defended Weininger as "passionately defending" her position, Chehade notes.

“Imagine if she said that about an African-American or if she said that about a Jew? She would be fired. She should not be let within 1000 feet of an academic institution. Racism is racism. What type of message us Columbia College sending when you have this supporter of racism as one of the main heads of this institution?”

For Chehade, a Palestinian-American, Weininger’s comment and Love’s defense of her position is extremely insulting.

“I was sitting in front of this woman who I was grieving my issue to, knowing that she supported someone who said this about Palestinians. Columbia College should not have hired her. ”

In its letter to Louise Love, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) Illinois first cites the Columbia College Collective Bargaining Agreement, which includes prohibiting “explicit or implicit threat of termination or discipline for the purpose of constraining a faculty member in the exercise of his or her rights under such principles of Academic Freedom. [CBA art. V (1), (2).”

Highlighting the standard norm of dealing with student complaints, the AAUP statement notes that the alleged complaint against Chehade “trespassed on the academic freedom of a professor and should have been referred back to the instructor for resolution.” Critically, the statement notes that “neither Dr. Steven Corey, the chairperson of the Department of Humanities, History and Social Science nor School of Liberal Arts and Sciences Dean Deborah Holdstein directed the student to take the complaint to the instructor,” calling their actions “a violation of widely accepted norms of academic due process.”

According to the AAUP, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is “not easy pedagogy because of the passions it arouses among disparate groups in the United States....It is beyond dispute that the film 5 Broken Cameras was directly related to the course topic.”

In response to Chair Corey’s admonition to Chehade that he be “balanced,” and Provost Love’s questioning Chehade whether he presented his material in a “balanced” manner, the AAUP notes that the issue of “balance is “frequently used to reign in a professor from critical thinking...towards a consensus approach that is more acceptable to elite or mainstream opinion.”

Similarly, for Chehade, the term “balance” is a loaded term. “When it is applied to the academic context, and specifically to the context of teaching the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is extremely problematic. This is an issue that lacks balance. It’s an asymmetrical issue: there are a people that are occupied, millions who have no civil rights. As a professor in a college, how do you present that as “balanced”? It would be like presenting the African-American struggle for liberation from the Jim Crow laws in the South as a “balanced” issue, where you have African Americans who are trying to gain rights, and you have white, southern oppressors who have institutionalized and systemized laws that violate their rights. How do you present that as “balanced”? If somebody asked that from an African American professor, who presents the African-American struggle for liberation, it would be ludicrous.”

In the detailed account of the cancellation of one of Chehade’s sections, the AAUP Illinois finishes its statement by noting that the six days between Chehade’s meeting with Corey, and the subsequent removal of the second section are “linked events.” Notably, the AAUP reiterates “we conclude that Professor Chehade’s academic freedom was violated as a

result.”

In line with Chehade’s own expectations, the AAUP asks that Columbia College reinstate both sections of Chehade’s popular Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in fall 2014. They also emphasize the need for a “strategic reassessment” of Columbia’s policy of handling student complaints, noting that at present the system for doing so is “clearly broken and conducive to academic freedom violations.”

Chehade, who wants to ensure that other professors who speak about Palestine in a fact-based manner are not stifled, applauds the AAUP statement.

“I would like to thank the AAUP for their conclusion. Discussing the Occupation of Palestine is not an exception to the rule of Academic Freedom at Columbia College or any college campus in the United States.”

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