



**CAFA Statement No. 1/2024**  
**Academic Freedom and peaceful protest on university grounds**  
**21 May 2024**

In recent months, universities in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and Peru, among other countries in the Americas, have been the sites of widespread, intense protests, including occupation of university buildings and/or establishment of encampments on campus, over the war in Gaza. Media outlets and human rights organizations have reported cases of mass illegal/arbitrary detention, the disproportionate use of force by security officers, and arbitrary restrictions on and retaliation for student assembly and expression (including expulsions and suspensions). Further, reports of religious and ethnic violence, harassment against members of the higher-education community, including antisemitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab incidents raise grave concerns.

The Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas (CAFA) documents and monitors restrictions on and attacks against academic freedom and university autonomy, and their impact on democracy, justice, and rule of law. CAFA calls on higher-education authorities and public officials to take available measures to ensure a safe space for the free and open exchange of ideas on campus. This includes the respect and protection, within the limits established by law, of the rights to academic freedom, freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, the right to protest and personal security on campus.

As recognized in the [Inter-American Principles on Academic Freedom and University Autonomy](#), members of higher-education community, including students, benefit from “(...) the right to express oneself, to assemble and demonstrate peacefully in relation to the topics being researched or debated within that community in any space (...)”. In democratic societies, universities are centers to discuss ideas and situations of public interest, critically and respectfully. This principle must be respected by all stakeholders.

As stated in the [Principles for Implementing the Right to Academic Freedom](#), members of the higher-education community “(...) have the right to engage in expression and discourse with persons and groups inside and outside the academic, research and teaching sector”. Consistent with this, the [Canadian Association of University Teachers](#) has stated that restrictions “(...) on freedom of expression and protest can only be justified with clear, objective and demonstrable evidence of danger to persons, serious violations of the law, and major disruptions to the essential operations of a university or college”.

International human rights law recognizes that the right to protest may include a temporary disturbance and inconvenience to daily life. As the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [has determined](#), the “(...) occupation of buildings, whether public or private, constitute a legitimate form of protest. Any restriction on these demonstrations must be exceptional, necessary, and proportional”.

Higher-education authorities must therefore refrain from taking measures which inappropriately limit peaceful expression on campus or threaten to sanction students or other members of the higher-education community for exercising their rights to free expression, assembly, and academic freedom. On the contrary, higher-education institutions should take all available measures to foster, protect, and model healthy, public debate.

The heated debates surrounding the war in Gaza demand a renewed commitment, by all stakeholders, to the values at the heart of a healthy university. We call on the states and on higher-education authorities to protect and promote academic freedom and institutional autonomy across the Americas, including taking available measures to ensure the rights of free expression and assembly on campus, and in all events, by refraining from engaging in undue restrictions on these rights.

We likewise call on all stakeholders – including higher education authorities, public officials, students, educators, and members of the public – to ensure that campuses are spaces of learning, respect, and open debate, free from violence and intimidation, hate speech, harassment, and discrimination, including antisemitism, anti-Muslim and anti-Arab hate.

---

### **About the Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas**

[The Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas](https://cafa-claa.org/) (CAFA) fosters the promotion, protection, and respect for academic freedom, with the goal of developing relevant human rights standards that serve to protect higher education spaces, to identify best practices, and to strengthen democratic principles in the Americas.

The Coalition, chaired by the University of Monterrey, Scholars at Risk, and the Human Rights Research and Education Center at the University of Ottawa, is a growing network of scholars and human rights advocates in the Americas focused on educating, researching, and defending academic freedom in different political and social contexts.

For more information about the Coalition for Academic Freedom in the Americas, please visit our website (<https://cafa-claa.org/>) and follow us on Twitter [@CafaClaa](https://twitter.com/CafaClaa).

CAFA is co-chaired by

**SCHOLARS AT RISK**  
N E T W O R K

Centre  
de recherche  
et d'enseignement  
sur les  
DROITS DE LA PERSONNE



HUMAN RIGHTS  
Research  
and  
Education  
Centre

40

**UDEM**