

Students sanctioned for protest in defense of pro-Palestinian colleagues at University of Texas at Austin

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On Wednesday, four University of Texas at Austin students, Evan Scope Crafts, Sameeha Rizvi, Valkyrie Church and an unnamed student who wishes to remain anonymous, accepted sanctions imposed by University administrators for a December 8 protest they conducted in the office of Allan Cole, the dean of the Steve Hicks School of Social Work.

In accepting the sanctions, Scope Crafts, a PhD candidate, told media that he was not in a position to disrupt his degree: “I am four and a half years into a PhD; I can’t afford to lose what I have put into this at this point,” noting, “I feel like I’m being essentially forced to take the sanctions.”

The protest consisted of calling for the reinstatement of two student teaching assistants who were fired by Cole on November 22 after sending out a letter to their students expressing their disapproval of the university administration’s response in the wake of Israel’s genocidal campaign against Gaza after Hamas’s attack on October 7.

In response to the protest the four students were accused by the university administration of disruptive conduct and unauthorized entry into the office of Allan Cole.

The protest consisted of around 10 to 15 people, in which they entered Cole’s office and Scope Crafts read a letter aloud that condemned the firing of the two teaching assistants and demanded their immediate reinstatement. Cole hastily left the office and entered another room, shutting the door. After reading the two-page document, the students left. The students were later questioned about the protest by campus police.

According to Scope Crafts, the four students received a letter on January 17 stating the university was

investigating them for intentionally causing a disruption inside a school administrator’s office.

Scope Crafts told the *Texas Tribune*, “This is an attack on the civil liberties of all UT students. This is an attack on anybody who’s trying to fight for the rights of oppressed groups in the United States and abroad.”

Sameeha Rizvi, who graduated from UT Austin in December, stated, “It seemed to be a chance, once again, to just censor and stop students from being able to organize effectively, especially where the administration doesn’t want to listen.”

The two teaching assistants, Callie Kennedy and Parham Daghighi, in coordination with their course professor Lauren Gulbas, composed the November 16 letter titled “Mental Health and the Violence in Gaza,” in which they expressed their concern for the psychological impact to students in the wake of the US-backed Israeli genocidal campaign in Gaza, and listed several resources which students could contact, including counseling services and other mental health organizations.

Kennedy and Daghighi wrote: “We wanted to send a message to acknowledge the mental health implications of the current escalation of violence in Gaza. As your teaching assistants, we feel it is important to be clear that we do not support the University’s silence around the suffering many of our students, staff and faculty are experiencing on campus.”

The letter additionally addressed a provocative incident which occurred on October 12 on the UT Austin campus, in which three men harassed members of the Palestine Solidarity Committee (PSC) at an educational conference held at Welch Hall.

The men, standing outside the room where the meeting was held, shouted obscenities and called PSC members and event attendees “f**king terrorists.” One of the men claimed he was traveling soon to Israel to kill Arabs. Another stated he was a soldier in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and attempted to enter the room, but PSC members prevented the men from opening the door. The members then requested the men leave, after which they left without further incident. The university appears to have taken no action.

Kennedy, in composing the letter, stated, “The message fully aligned with the scope of the course and our responsibility as teaching assistants,” adding, “I’ve had many positive and close professional working relationships with other faculty.” She said. “I did not fear any sort of retribution ... perhaps that was naive.”

A week later the university sent an email stating the two were fired, calling their letter “inappropriate and unprompted.”

Accepting the sanctions without challenge, the four students were essentially made out to be criminals by the university. They received a deferred suspension lasting until December 21, which means they can continue their course study at the campus, but will be immediately expelled if found to be in violation of any rules as set forth by the University of Texas system.

In addition, the students are prohibited from having any contact with any staff in the Dean of Social Work office suite and, perhaps the most humiliating of the imposed punishments, the students must agree to write a three-page letter “reflecting on their actions.” Sameeha Rizvi was exempted from writing a report as she graduated in December and is no longer a student at the university.

The firings of Kennedy and Daghighi and punishment of the student protesters are completely reactionary and antidemocratic, and follow the general response of universities and the ruling class as a whole around the country, which have sought to cast any and all opposition to the US/Israeli genocide in Gaza as antisemitic.

The turn by Washington and Europe to genocide as a tool of state policy has made clear the ruling class is willing to utilize increasingly antidemocratic methods against the millions of youth and workers protesting the murderous campaign against Gaza.



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