

CORNELL PRESIDENT REJECTS STUDENT ACTIVIST GROUPS' BDS PETITION

Cornell University President Martha Pollock rejected the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) demands of an anti-Israel coalition led by the Cornell Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) in a letter that also rebuked the group's overall purpose. Her response was prompted by a list of demands delivered by letter to Pollock in late February.

The [demands](#) demonized Israel, Cornell's "active role" in perpetuating colonialism and continued work "with companies and institutions that facilitate the dispossession of the Palestinian people." The group demanded [Cornell](#) "divest its endowment pool from companies complicit in the morally reprehensible human rights violations in Palestine."

Pollock countered in a statement expressing her "strong opposition to BDS" and rejected the demand that the school use its endowment as a tool of "political or social power."

Dear Cornell Students for Justice in Palestine,

Thank you for your letter and for sharing your thoughts regarding the BDS movement. While I appreciate your dedication to the issues that are outlined in your letter, I must reject your call for BDS-related divestment.

Cornell is an educational institution, and its primary purpose is to further the education of students, and the general public, through our teaching, research and engagement mission. Cornell is not primarily an agent to direct social or political action, but rather a neutral forum for analysis, debate and the search for truth. Similarly, the principal purpose of our endowment is to provide income for advancing our mission-related objectives and must not be viewed as a means of exercising political or social power.

Given that your letter shares your broader perspective on the BDS movement, I must also take this opportunity to share mine, which is a strong opposition to BDS. BDS unfairly singles out one country in the world for sanction when there are many countries around the world whose governments' policies may be viewed as controversial. Moreover, it places all of the responsibility for an extraordinarily complex geopolitical situation on just one country and frequently conflates the policies of the Israeli government with the very right of Israel to exist as a nation, which I find particularly troublesome. And, although not mentioned in your petition, the BDS movement, consistent with its name, calls for boycott, including academic boycott, which is at odds with Cornell's core commitment to academic freedom and the open exchange of ideas. Since its founding, Cornell has cultivated countless academic collaborations abroad, relationships that we encourage even in countries that have governments with which some faculty, students, and alumni have significant disagreements. These partnerships have supported our teaching, research and engagement mission and have resulted in outcomes that have benefitted the people of many countries, including our own.

This is a challenging time in history, with our university and the country confronting difficult matters of race, religion and politics, to name just a few, that could easily divide us. Here at Cornell, I am heartened to see an honest commitment to the hard work of respectful dialogue and mutual understanding that can help us to overcome differences and to find a way forward. I hope that instead of polarizing calls for divestment, the community can engage in productive discourse around paths forward in the Middle East, drawing on the kind of thoughtful analysis that defines us as a university. The high ideals of our students, faculty and staff are an inspiration, and I am hopeful that our nation and our university will both emerge stronger as a result.

Thank you again for reaching out to me.

Sincerely,

Martha E. Pollack