



Cornell University

University Relations  
Joel M. Malina, Vice President  
314 Day Hall  
Ithaca, NY 14853-2801  
t. 607.255.9029 c. 571.455.4432  
f. 607.255.5572  
joel.malina@cornell.edu  
www.cornell.edu

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Ms. Lindsie Rank  
Program Officer, Individual Rights Defense Program  
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)  
510 Walnut Street, Suite 1250  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

**Sent via electronic mail (lindsie.rank@thefire.org)**

Dear Ms. Rank,

I am writing in response to your letter of November 10, expressing concerns “about the state of freedom of the press at Cornell University.” I appreciate the opportunity to clarify many of your characterizations of Cornell’s approach to our faculty, staff and students’ access to the media as well as the rights of our student journalists to freely express their points of view.

Cornell was founded on a core belief that learning flourishes in an environment where diverse ideas are presented and debated without hindrance. This dedication to free and open inquiry and expression is reflected in our [Core Values](#) and have been [reinforced](#) by our president, Martha Pollack, who has made it a priority to help our campus community appreciate the importance of debating and reflecting on differing political and social views, including – and often especially – those that challenge our personal ideas and beliefs

In your letter you imply that Cornell has policies in place “that require faculty, student athletes, or student employees to secure permission before granting media interviews” and “policies and practices restricting the rights of the student media.” With respect to our student journalists, the Cornell Daily Sun is the nation’s oldest continuously run independent student newspaper and is operated solely by our students who are free to report without interference from university. These student journalists publish daily stories – many of which are critical of the university and its administration – that are informed by their access to the campus. I note that Cornell’s published approach to [media access](#) explicitly states that “the Media Relations Office may provide the Cornell Daily Sun with *special access* to information or events in recognition of its unique role as an independent student-run campus newspaper” (emphasis added).

In addition, Cornell University invests considerable financial and staff resources to support and encourage active and robust engagement with the media. Those efforts include teams of communicators within colleges, schools and other units working in close partnership with multiple teams in University Relations to promote faculty, staff and students through our online platforms (cornell.edu, news.cornell.edu), through highly active social media channels, and through hundreds of releases, advisories, faculty expert “tip sheets,” direct pitches to journalists, and video and audio broadcast studio efforts every year. In addition, University

Relations works with these same partners to actively support media requests for information and interviews, handling almost 800 such requests in 2019 alone.

Your letter also suggests that Cornell maintains a host of “restrictive press policies,” detailed in a report published by John Wilson at the University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement (the “Wilson Report”). The Wilson Report argues that Cornell’s approach is restrictive in that it requires members of the media to seek permission prior to arriving on campus and that a university representative may escort the media when on campus. These are commonplace guidelines designed to protect the reasonable expectation of privacy enjoyed by faculty, staff and students on campus, and to protect the day-to-day operation of research and education – and not a policy designed to control direct media engagement with faculty, staff or students.

In fact, it is worth noting that our approach states that media members “may not interview, capture images or record audio of faculty, students, staff or visitors *without specific permission of the individuals involved*” (emphasis added). We specifically and directly recognize the right of faculty, staff, students and visitors to decide if they wish to engage with the media. Cornell’s support for media access to campus is evidenced by the thousands of print and broadcast media stories published about Cornell and its faculty, staff and students each year. These stories were created with the active involvement of Cornell’s Media Relations Offices to assist reporter in accessing our campus resources.

Thank you again for sharing your concerns and providing Cornell the opportunity to clarify inaccurate characterizations in your letter. Cornell remains committed to ensuring that each of its faculty, staff and students may freely express their ideas and to share them with the media.

Sincerely,



Joel M. Malina  
Vice President for University Relations