

Federal Mandates and Campus Rights: FIRE's Response to Title VI Pressure at Columbia

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Topic: Oversight and Support of Student Groups

In its [demand letter](#) to Columbia University, the federal government directed the institution to pursue formal investigations and disciplinary proceedings — up to and including expulsion — against recognized student groups, as well as individuals “operating as constituent members of, or providing support for, unrecognized groups” that have violated university policy. Columbia initially [responded](#) by outlining existing and forthcoming disciplinary policies for student groups. The [Resolution Agreement](#) reiterates these disciplinary processes and makes clear that student groups are subject to all manner of discipline, including sanctions such as defunding, suspension, and derecognition.

In considering the government's directive, Columbia's response, and the binding terms of the Resolution Agreement, it's important to reaffirm a basic principle: colleges must sanction student groups that violate university policies, but fairness demands that punishment be tied to conduct — not mere association. Sanctions must be applied evenhandedly, under clearly articulated and viewpoint neutral policies, using established and transparent procedures.

That same principle applies to individual students. It is critical that Columbia uphold basic guarantees of due process. “Guilt by association” is not accountability; it is a fundamental breach of fairness. Individual students must be held accountable for their own actions, not for merely expressing support or associating with disfavored groups.

Yet the federal government is [demanding](#) that the university abandon those principles for politics.

If Columbia's enforcement is perceived as targeting certain groups — especially those with controversial or unpopular political movements — while turning a blind eye to others, it will reinforce the perception that discipline is not about fairly enforcing reasonable rules but rather about political expedience.

Associating with the wrong group or simply holding the wrong views cannot be all it takes for students to find themselves facing discipline. Instead, discipline must be rooted in individual responsibility for individual conduct. Unless Columbia can prove a student participated in a group's misconduct, it must not sanction the student for the actions of others. Using charges against student groups as a cudgel against individual members

without requisite evidence isn't due process — it's reverse-engineered guilt.

Columbia must not engage in viewpoint discrimination or proxy punishment. Instead, it must ensure that findings of responsibility — whether for groups or individuals — are built on fair procedures, clear standards, direct evidence, and a principled commitment to expressive freedoms.