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OFFICE OF GENERAL COUNSEL

December 18, 2025

**Via Email** [marie.mcmullan@fire.org](mailto:marie.mcmullan@fire.org)

Ms. Marie McMullan  
Student Free Press, Campus Rights Advocacy  
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)  
510 Walnut Street, Suite 900  
Philadelphia, PA 19106

RE: Protest Incident at UMD Chapter of Students Supporting Israel Event on October 21, 2025

Dear Ms. McMullan:

I am writing in response to your letter to Jay Rossello, Vice President and General Counsel of the University of Maryland, College Park (“UMD” or the “University”), dated December 8, 2025. Please direct any future correspondence regarding this matter to my attention.

In your letter, you claim that the University has improperly brought student conduct charges against two University Students, Riona Sheikh and Rumayasa Drissi (the “Students”), in connection with their conduct and roles during a protest incident outside of an approved University event held by UMD’s Students Supporting Israel chapter (“SSI”) on October 21, 2025. You accuse the University of violating the Students’ rights as student journalists, claiming that they cannot be sanctioned for reporting on the SSI event and other individuals’ protests thereof. For the reasons that follow, the University disputes your contention that it is sanctioning the Students for exercising their rights as journalists. The University has taken no action of any kind in connection with their reporting of the events relating to the SSI event and the protesters’ actions in response to it. To the contrary, the University has charged the Students with participating in the protest of the SSI event, in a manner that ran afoul of applicable University policies. Regardless of whether the Students are affiliated with a student media outlet or were intending to report on the event afterwards, like all students they are subject to the University’s Code of Student Conduct (“[Code](#)”) and, if they violated the Code, they are subject to the consequences set forth therein.

As an initial matter, the disciplinary proceedings against the Students are not yet resolved and there have been no findings against them to date. Nothing in this letter should be interpreted to imply that the University has made any predeterminations of wrongdoing by the Students. The Code provides substantial procedural rights for students accused of violating the Code. *See* Code Sections IX-XIII. The Students are entitled to, and are, receiving these procedural protections and are presumed to be not responsible unless and until they are found responsible by

a preponderance of the evidence. *See* Code Section VI. This letter, therefore, only addresses the charges against the Students, without any presumption that they in fact violated the Code. That determination will be made by a neutral University administrator following the Students' respective Disciplinary Conferences pursuant to the Code's provisions.

### *Background*

As you know, and as FIRE has recognized by virtue of its "Green Light Rating," UMD is a staunch defender of the free speech and expression rights of all members of the campus community, including in particular its students. *See, e.g., Statement of Free Speech Values*, <https://policies.umd.edu/statement-free-speech-values>; *Freedom of Speech on Campus*, <https://ogc.umd.edu/freedom-of-speech>. Consistent with these values, the University has adopted policies and procedures to allow students and student groups to reserve space for free speech events, including events involving guest speakers.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the University undertakes to protect such events from disruptions – i.e. from "hecklers' vetoes." For example, the Code specifically prohibits students from "intentionally and substantially interfering with the lawful freedom of expression of others" (Code, Section VII.A.3) or engaging in disorderly or disruptive action that interferes with University events (*see* Code, Section VII.D.4).

On October 21, 2025, SSI hosted an event in a University classroom which featured talks given by three former members of the Israeli Defense Forces. SSI followed the applicable University procedures in reserving the classroom space and making the other necessary arrangements with the University. Moreover, the University of Maryland Police Department ("UMPD") assigned police officer(s) to assist in insuring the security of the event, consistent with its practice for similar events.

As you know, the SSI event and their choice of invited speakers invoked significant opposition from some members of the campus community. As a result, in an effort to protect the free speech rights of all members of the campus community while simultaneously protecting SSI's right to have an event free from disruption, the University designated a protest/counter-speech location outside of the building in which the SSI event was being held. Some University groups planned and advertised a protest event in this designated space.

Notwithstanding the provision of a designated protest space, several individuals actively disrupted the SSI event by entering the building and shouting slogans immediately outside the door of the room where the event was being held. In the subsequent complaint which the SSI student president filed with the Office of Student Conduct ("OSC"), a redacted copy of which is attached, he states: that one participant suffered "fear and discomfort" from the protesters' shouting; that he (the president) was "terrified for our safety;" that students attending the event were "confused and unsure if they could leave;" that they were "barricaded in the room;" and that when the attendees left they had to leave in a single file, through a path created by UMPD,

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<sup>1</sup> *See, e.g.,* <https://policies.umd.edu/general-administration/university-of-maryland-policy-and-procedures-for-the-use-of-facilities-and-outdoor-spaces>; [https://stamp.umd.edu/meeting\\_events/event\\_guest\\_services/policies\\_procedures#security](https://stamp.umd.edu/meeting_events/event_guest_services/policies_procedures#security).

during which they were “wary” of the protesters. According to the complaint, UMPD also had to escort the guest speakers out the back of the building.<sup>2</sup>

A UMPD Officer directed the protesters to immediately cease their shouting and to vacate the area, and advised them they were impermissibly interrupting a University-approved event.<sup>3</sup> At least some of these individuals refused to comply with these directions. When these individuals failed to comply with the UMPD Officer’s lawful directions, other UMPD officers responded to the scene. After these individuals still refused to vacate the area, UMPD requested identification from four people before they were allowed to depart; the only reason they were detained was so UMPD could obtain their identities. The Students were part of the group of people who were asked to provide identification before they were free to depart.<sup>4</sup>

### *Charges Against the Students Under the Code of Student Conduct*

As noted above, as a result of the foregoing incident, the student chapter president of SSI filed a complaint with the UMD Office of Student Conduct. The complaint details the incident and the impact the protest had on the attendees of the SSI event. In addition, UMPD provided the OSC with its Incident Report. The SSI complaint references two students who had previously identified themselves as *Al-Hikmah News* reporters (presumably the Students), and alleges that they “were standing right next to the ones holding posters at certain points in the video shown, and in particular when a few UMPD officers arrived on scene, and generally stayed within a few feet of the rest of the protesters.” *See* Complaint, at 2. The UMPD police report identifies the Students by name (even though they refused to provide their names during the incident) and contains information about their interactions with the other alleged protesters. *See* UMPD Incident Report.

As a result of the SSI complaint and the UMPD Incident Report, the Students face charges for a variety of offenses under the Code: 1. interfering with the lawful freedom of expression of others; 2. participating in disorderly or disruptive action; 3. intentionally providing false information to the University; and 4. failing to comply with University official’s directives, such as failing to provide identification when requested. This letter will address the first two of these charges.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In Footnote 14 of your letter, you claim that the protesters did not disrupt the SSI event, basing this claim on a statement in a *Diamondback* news article. The charges in this case are based on the allegations in the complaint which SSI filed with OSC, not on a statement contained in a newspaper. According to the complaint, the protesters’ activity had a direct negative impact on the SSI event, which was mitigated by UMPD’s actions to quell the protest as quickly as possible.

<sup>3</sup> *See* Officer Hampton Redacted Footage. The entire incident is captured on police body worn camera (BWC) footage. Redacted versions of two officers’ BWC footage have been released by the University in response to public information act request, and are being made available to you along with this letter.

<sup>4</sup> *See generally* UMPD BWC Footage.

<sup>5</sup> I understand from your letter that FIRE is not questioning the legitimacy of the charges relating to the Students’ conduct in allegedly furnishing false information to the University and failing to comply with directives from University officials.

Contrary to your apparent assumption, the Students are *not* facing disciplinary charges because they were recording the protest or because they may have been intending to report on the protest in the *Al-Hikmah News*. Instead, they are facing charges because evidence indicates that they may have been part of the active disruption of the SSI event, whether they were actively shouting or not, which would constitute a violation of the Code.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the Students may have been student journalists and intended to report on the protest is not at issue; the question is whether they participated in an active disruption of another student group's approved event. The prohibition on such conduct applies to all students, including student journalists. The University has adopted procedures for such cases and it will be up to a University administrator to determine whether such violations occurred, after the Students have a chance to present their cases at their Disciplinary Conferences.

In your letter, you also claim that the Students were treated differently than other student journalists, in that they were requested to show their identification and/or credentials, whereas a *Diamondback* reporter was not asked to do so. This allegation is demonstrably inaccurate. As shown in UMPD Officer Rocca's body worn camera footage, when he approached a *Diamondback* reporter she immediately shared her identification/media credentials, which were prominently displayed hanging around her neck. *See Officer Rocca Redacted Video*, at timestamp 46:50. This reporter's response was in stark contrast to the Students', who declined to provide any identification, including their names, or the name of the media outlet they were representing. In fact, at least one of the Students claimed that she forgot her own birthdate. *See id.* at 3:15-3:30.

FIRE is demanding that the University drop the student conduct charges against the Students based on the Students' claim, and FIRE's belief, that the Students were not participating in the protest incident at issue. Whether they were or not is up to the University administrator conducting their Disciplinary Conferences, following consideration of the evidence reviewed therein. The Students are subject to the same rules and procedures as all other students, and are not entitled to special treatment just because they claimed to be student journalists— special treatment which would be unfair to the other students impacted by this incident, such as the ones who planned and attended the SSI event, and to other students who are charged with misconduct under the Code.

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<sup>6</sup> *See generally* SSI Complaint and UMPD Incident Report. This evidence includes the fact that the Students appeared to be aware of the protest incident ahead of time, they were immediately adjacent to the active protesters when it occurred, they appeared to know and cooperate with the protesters during and after the incident, and they displayed no media credentials and refused to provide any personal identification or the name of their media outlet to UMPD when asked. As noted above, however, this letter only addresses the charges and the evidence presented to OSC in support of charges; this letter does not assert that the Students are in fact responsible for these violations. That decision will be up to the University administrator following the Students' Disciplinary Conferences, at which time they will have a full opportunity to respond to the charges, pursuant to the procedures established in the Code.

Allowing protesters or other individuals to disrupt a sanctioned free speech event is antithetical to the University's mission to provide safe venues for such events for all students, regardless of the content or viewpoint of such speech. In this case, UMPD's actions were necessary to protect SSI's rights when protesters attempted to disrupt its event. UMPD was entitled to obtain the names and identities of the individuals involved in this incident and students are obligated to provide their identities when asked by University officials. Moreover, SSI and UMPD were entitled to refer the matter to the Office of Student Conduct to determine, pursuant to the Code's procedures, if any students violated the Code of Student Conduct. If, following those procedures, the evidence supports a finding that the Students participated in the disruption of the SSI event, and/or were responsible for the other charges brought against them, then they are subject to sanctions under the Code, regardless of whether they were also acting as student journalists. Student journalists cannot seek the protective cloak offered by the First Amendment if they themselves violate it by disrupting other students' free speech rights.

Accordingly, and for all the reasons set forth herein, the University respectfully rejects your request to drop the first two charges pending against the Students.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have any questions regarding the foregoing.

Sincerely,

*/s/ Christopher B. Lord*

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Enclosures (provided through a Box drive)

Cc: Jay Rossello, Vice President and General Counsel