



Campus Climate and the Conflict in the Middle East: A Community Response

Rutgers University–New Brunswick
Office of the Chancellor
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Jewish and Muslim Students/Faculty/Staff at Rutgers University–New Brunswick

Rutgers University–New Brunswick is home to thousands of Jewish and Muslim students actively engaged in campus life. Our community also includes Muslim and Jewish faculty and staff across many academic disciplines, research labs, healthcare operations, and supportive roles throughout the institution.

Our community has been deeply impacted by the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Given the personal connections that many of our Jewish and Muslim students, faculty, and staff have to the Middle East, Israel, and Palestinian territories, we understand why the war between Israel and Hamas is of tremendous concern to many in our campus community, even those without such connections. Also evident are the humanitarian, historical, moral, political, security, and future-oriented concerns raised by this conflict.

Community Expressions

Our campus community has witnessed varying forms of expression in response to the ongoing war. These have included vigils to mourn the lives lost, demonstrations and counter-demonstrations to bring attention to specific issues, “sit-ins” and “teach-ins,” sidewalk chalking, social media messaging, and editorials in *The Daily Targum*. As a public institution of higher education, Rutgers allows for such forms of expression provided they adhere to University policies, including our Code of Student Conduct and anti-discrimination policies. When in compliance with University policies, these forms of expression are protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and, in the case of faculty who express their ideas in the discharge of their duties, by the principles of academic freedom. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that acts of expression can be perceived and experienced differently depending on lived experiences. We have also learned that specific language expressions can hold multiple meanings for different communities. Yet we remain committed to providing an environment in which all community members feel safe expressing their views.

Campus Climate Concerns

Members of Rutgers–New Brunswick have expressed concern and called attention to their experiences of antisemitism and Islamophobia. These concerns have resulted in numerous student bias reports filed with the Offices of the Dean of Students and the Office of Employment Equity. Although filing a bias report does not always result in a finding of a bias-related incident, its filing does reflect the intensity of the current campus climate. Moreover, college campuses across the United States have seen increasing reports of Islamophobia and antisemitism.

As President Holloway has said, neither hatred nor bigotry has a place at Rutgers, nor should they have a place anywhere in the world. At Rutgers we believe that antisemitism, Islamophobia, and all forms of racism, intolerance, and xenophobia are unacceptable wherever and whenever they occur.

Any credible threats of violence or behaviors deemed to be targeting a member of our community due to religious beliefs, perceived appearance, or group affiliation receive due attention from the Rutgers University Police Department, other law enforcement agencies, the Office of Employment Equity, and/or the Offices of the Dean of Students (e.g., via the Office of Student Conduct).

Rutgers University's mission includes creating knowledge, learning, and the exchange of ideas and perspectives among students and faculty. As a result, there will be times when the educational content presented in class or through a sponsored program may be deemed offensive or limited in its point of view. In these cases, we have encouraged community members to listen and engage with the content presenters or to counter disliked speech with responding speech (e.g., hosting an alternative program that provides a different point of view). Unless there is credible evidence that a program or gathering of campus community members presents an immediate threat to public safety or disrupts educational activities or processes, we are obligated as a public institution to support the free exchange of ideas and perspectives even if others may perceive the content as controversial. More importantly, we encourage faculty to maintain safe and inclusive classrooms by speaking authoritatively on areas of their expertise appropriate to the course and being cognizant of the impact of speech on members of our community. We care for the well-being of our campus community, specifically our students who are here to obtain an education and are already dealing with many other sources of stress.

What is Rutgers–New Brunswick Currently Doing?

Communication and Outreach

Rutgers–New Brunswick has consistently communicated with faculty, staff, and students. These communications express care while sharing resources and establishing expectations for engaging with each other during a challenging moment in our history.

Communications have occurred in-person in varied settings, such as between student organizations and their advisors, faculty and students, religious chaplains and students, and academic department chairs and their respective faculty. In one case, a meeting between student leaders and staff lasted three hours to ensure deep listening and understanding and to build trust (there are undoubtedly many examples like this). Furthermore, there have been many unsung heroes during the last eight weeks, some known to us and others unknown, who have taken the time to provide students or colleagues a space for listening, processing, meaning-making, or simply expressing frustration. A true community is one in which its members can be there for each other during the best and, more importantly, during the worst of times.

Under challenging conditions, the Division of Student Affairs has worked to maintain consistent communication with crucial student organizations (e.g., the Muslim Public Relations Council), campus partners (e.g., RUPD), and religious life affiliates (e.g., Hillel, the Center for Islamic Life at Rutgers University, etc.) to foster information sharing, increase awareness about policies and resources, and promote a collective campus approach to student support. Communication has

also consisted of responding to emerging issues promptly while sharing information up, down, and across the University as necessary.

Another way Rutgers–New Brunswick has communicated with the campus community is via electronic communication. Below is a list of electronic communications from the Chancellor of Rutgers–New Brunswick, Dr. Francine Conway, and the Senior Vice Chancellor for the Student Experience, Dr. Salvador Mena. Chancellor Conway has communicated to the entire campus community, including faculty, staff, and students, expressing hope and care and sharing resources. Senior Vice Chancellor Mena has focused on students’ unique needs while sharing guidance for engaging with members of the campus community.

Chancellor Conway Communications:

- [*Caring for Each Other During Times of Crisis*](#), 10/19/2023
- [*Promoting the Safety of Our Community*](#), 11/06/23
- [*Freedom from Discrimination, Freedom to Learn in Safety*](#), 11/13/2023
- [*With Gratitude from Chancellor Conway*](#), 11/22/2023

Senior Vice Chancellor Mena Communications:

- [*Moving Forward Together: R Community*](#), 10/13/2023
- [*Promoting Kindness and Celebrating Service*](#), 11/10/2023

Other modes of communication have been used as well. For example, the Office of Parent and Family Programs hosted a Zoom town hall for parents on how the University manages student free speech forums. The event was organized in response to misinformation that had been shared on a non-university-sponsored parents’ social media page. The event featured campus leaders and experts responsible for advising faith-based organizations, administering public forums, and providing public safety. While there was a difference of opinion between some attendees and the presenters, the University understands the vital role of parents and families in supporting student success and well-being and fully appreciates parents’ concerns about safety in the current climate.

Community Programming and Outreach

While communicating consistently with stakeholders is vital during any crisis, the current war presents immediate challenges that require ongoing efforts to help address issues and provide the campus community with opportunities for learning and engagement. It is critical that the University be proactive to meet the needs of faculty, staff, and students. To this end, Chancellor Conway has convened a Task Force on Caring for Each Other, led by Dr. Victoria Banyard, Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs.

Below is a partial list of programmatic and outreach efforts that have occurred to date for the Rutgers–New Brunswick community to advance shared understanding, campus community, and our commitment to free speech and academic freedom.

- Caring for Our Community [Website](#)

- Provost’s Series on Fostering a Campus Climate Free from Bias, Discrimination, and Harassment.
 - [*On Speech: When Academic Freedom and Diversity Collide*](#)
 - [*Resources for Teaching and Student Support: Responding to Needs During the Israel-Hamas War*](#)
- Preliminary planning for the future development of peace and community gardens in Deiner Park
- Interfaith Processing Space for Students
- [Celebration of World Kindness Day](#)
- [Five Days of Gratitude Challenge](#)
- [Promoting Volunteer Opportunities in Support of Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week](#)
- Student Free Speech Program

Future Planning

Rutgers–New Brunswick is committed to meeting the needs of our diverse community members. Below is a list of strategies for supporting our campus community through the current crisis and beyond.

- **Strategy #1: DEI Programming and Training** – In line with the goals outlined in Rutgers–New Brunswick’s Diversity Strategic Plan, provide expanded opportunities for awareness and education on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues for faculty, staff, and students. Such programming and training must be broad in its offerings and adaptive to changing conditions. For example, our commitment to increasing awareness about antisemitism and Islamophobia must be a shared responsibility across Rutgers–New Brunswick for all faculty, staff, and students. We will seek opportunities to provide training from professional organizations with the necessary content expertise.
- **Strategy #2: Defining Antisemitism and Islamophobia for Our Community** – Given the unique demographic make-up of our student body, our location in a diverse region with large numbers of people from or with origins in the Middle East, and our recent and historical experiences with these and other forms of discrimination, we must do more to help our campus community understand the roots of Islamophobia and antisemitism and how they manifest in our community.

- **Strategy #3: Establish Advisory Groups for the Chancellor** – Advisory groups can provide expertise and a sounding board for Rutgers–New Brunswick leadership. While established relationships and networks in Rutgers–New Brunswick have been invaluable during this current crisis, we have not been able to turn to any official groupings of community members to assist us with responding to the community’s needs and navigating the challenging dynamics that the current crisis is presenting our campus community. For example, there currently exists an informal Jewish Student Life Advisory Committee which represents concerned and interested community members, but no such formal group exists. We therefore commit to the creation of an advisory group charged with assessing and improving campus life for Jewish students, faculty, and staff, and another advisory group charged with doing the same for our Muslim students, faculty, and staff.
- **Strategy #4: Review and Update Current Policies and Procedures** – A crisis presents a university community with the opportunity to review its policies and procedures, along with their implementation, to better prepare for the future. Specifically, and related to this crisis, we will review our bias policy and protocols to ensure their effectiveness. We will also review and evaluate related policies and procedures.
- **Strategy #5: Establish Taskforce on Faculty, Staff, and Students Codes of Conduct** – Our Scarlet Knight community has witnessed varying degrees of response to the crisis. We have seen how our community comes together for mutual support, and have heard of instances in which community members have felt unsafe. We may have all the right policies and systems, but how are we conveying community expectations and norms for interacting with each other and the broader community, especially during complex challenges? We will review our codes of conduct at Rutgers–New Brunswick with an eye to ensuring sufficient accountability.
- **Strategy #6: Redefine What Community Outreach Looks Like** – We have learned the value of having preestablished relationships with campus partners and other stakeholders based on trust, mutual respect, and a collaborative commitment to the best interests of the Rutgers community. Although our campus community has benefited during this crisis from existing personal relationships and cross-unit partnerships, we should explore whether our community can benefit further from new strategic alliances or more intentional outreach to different segments of our campus community. For example, can we facilitate conversations between RUPD and student groups who have historically been distrusting of law enforcement? Such discussions can strengthen relationships and better prepare us for another crisis. What would it mean for senior leadership in Rutgers–New Brunswick to attend Muslim prayers on Fridays, or Shabbat dinners at Hillel, to foster ongoing relationships with students and campus partners? What could be the outcome of hosting a cultural dinner and conversation with a group of faculty members? Relationship building and nurturing are needed well before critical incidents occur.
- **Strategy #7: Examine Ways to Strengthen Our Process for Supporting Different Forms of Free Expression** – Our history as one of the country’s oldest institutions of higher education, coupled with our community’s diversity and location in the greater

New York City area, makes Rutgers–New Brunswick a place where, at any moment, views can be expressed and challenged in public forums, classrooms, or even in passing. While our process for supporting free expression has been adopted by other institutions of higher education and presented as a best practice at national conferences, we can learn from our recent experience where students have questioned our support of them. How can we ensure greater consistency and adherence to expectations while being responsive to issues that arise with protest organizers, attendees, or outsiders? How can we better plan and coordinate as an institution for large protest gatherings to ensure adequate staffing and security?

While the above strategies are not all-encompassing, they provide us with opportunities to learn from the challenges that our campus community faces due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. The lessons we continue to learn and our commitment to do better on behalf of all members of our community will strengthen our campus today and into the future.