

Chicago University at loggerheads with students and faculty for backtracking on Gaza program



By Maryam Qarehgozlou

In May, when students had set up “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” at the University of Chicago, the university administration pledged to establish a “Gaza Scholars At Risk” program.

The university at the time gave a written commitment to one of the key demands of protesters: the scholarship initiative to bring at least eight Palestinian scholars to the university for at least a year.

However, seven months on, students and faculty members say the university administration has backed out on its commitment to launch the program and host Palestinian scholars.

It has fueled anger and outrage on the campus, with students accusing the university administration of succumbing to the Israeli lobby pressure.

In mid-April, universities across the United States, followed by other Western countries in Europe and beyond, were rocked by pro-Palestinian demonstrations and encampments.

These demonstrations came as the Israeli regime continued massacring Palestinians, including women and children, in the besieged Gaza Strip, using lethal weapons supplied by Washington.

Protesters urged their respective university administrations to divest from the Israeli regime and put an end to their complicity in the perpetuation of genocidal war crimes in the Gaza Strip.

On May 4, University of Chicago administrators signed off on an agreement as a condition for student protesters to engage in negotiations to end the pro-Gaza campus encampment, as reported by media.

According to emails, University of Chicago Provost Katherine Baicker pledged to publicly announce a “Gaza Scholars at Risk” initiative and recruit up to eight Gaza professors for one-year appointments.

The correspondence revealed that the new initiative would be implemented regardless of the outcome of negotiations between the university administration and protesting students.

It aimed to assist academics affected by the Israeli genocidal war on Gaza, specifically those facing direct threats of arrest or imprisonment, as well as those at risk due to the ongoing genocide.

To ensure the initiative’s success, Provost Baicker committed to establishing a Gaza Scholars at Risk faculty committee, comprising regional experts responsible for identifying and supporting eligible candidates.

Despite his pledges, many students and faculty members have recently reported that none of those commitments have been fulfilled, raising concerns about the University of Chicago’s dedication to the promised initiatives and its support for Gaza scholars at risk amid the ongoing genocide.

In a series of posts on the Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine at the University of Chicago X account, faculty members and alumni of the university underscored the catastrophic devastation of academic institutions in Gaza to stress the importance of such a program.

They emphasized the dire necessity of a safe place for Gaza-based scholars facing threats to their academic freedom and life and called on the university administration to fulfill the commitment made during the previous spring.

Eman Abdelhadi, an assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago, drew attention to the plight of scholars in Gaza in a video message.

She implored the university to take action and create a sanctuary for displaced academics in response to the urgent needs of scholars facing severe challenges in their pursuit of education and research.

"Our colleagues have nowhere to go, and they need us now more than ever, the university, which is complicit in the assault on Gaza could at the very least provide some safe haven for these scholars," she said in a video statement posted on X, formerly Twitter.

Abdelhadi asserted that the University of Chicago has misled the public regarding the development of the Gaza Scholars at Risk program, adding that the initiative has seen no tangible progress, raising concerns about the administration's commitment to addressing the challenges faced by Gaza scholars.

"Provost Baker, it's time to make this right, because the scholars are at risk now," she warned.

Faith Hillis, a professor in the history department at the University of Chicago, echoed the call for accountability and urged the university administration to honor its commitment by establishing a Scholars At Risk program at the University of Chicago.

This initiative, Hillis emphasized, would provide essential support to Palestinian scholars "whose life trajectories and research have been interrupted by Israel's war on Gaza."

Hillis highlighted the University of Chicago's swift response to the Scholars At Risk program for Ukrainian academics amid the protracted Ukraine-Russia conflict. She noted that the first group of Ukrainian Scholars At Risk arrived in September 2022, approximately six months after the outset of the war in Ukraine, demonstrating the university's efficiency in providing support to those scholars affected by the crisis.

"I would argue that the threats to academic freedom posed today in Gaza are even more severe than those posed in Ukraine, and this is because every university in Gaza has been destroyed," she said.

"They have been leveled. There are no universities left."

Alireza Doostdar, a professor of Anthropology, Religious Studies, and Islamic Studies at the University of Chicago, also voiced his concerns regarding Provost Baicker's renunciation of written promises.

Doostdar reminded Baicker that the text of these written commitments, as disclosed by WBEZ website and others, serves as evidence of the commitments that she has failed to uphold. He called on the university administration "to stop gaslighting students" and faculty colleagues and establish the Gaza Scholars At Risk initiative while "the genocide and scholasticide against Palestinians continues unabated."

Darryl Li, a University of Chicago anthropology professor with firsthand experience living in Gaza, condemned the systematic destruction of educational institutions throughout the territory.

Li characterized the "scholasticide" as a component of a broader genocidal agenda targeting the Palestinian people, a campaign that has persisted over the past 14 months of the Israeli genocide in the besieged territory, claiming nearly 44,500 lives.

"Institutions of higher education in the United States, including the University of Chicago, are invested materially, symbolically and otherwise in this ongoing genocide through a web of funds, investments and other linkages between the arms companies that profit from this ongoing destruction in Palestine and in many other places around the world," he said in a video statement.

He, too, implored the university to allocate funding to the Scholars At Risk program to support "a very small number of scholars" whose lives and work have been significantly impacted by the continuing genocidal events in Palestine.

Allyson Nadia Field, an associate professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago, joined the chorus of criticism directed at the administration for refuting the existence of any commitment regarding the Gaza Scholars at Risk program.

“Indeed, [the administration] seems to be denying ever having made such a commitment. How many more scholars university administrators and university presidents have to be killed before the US Academy responds, in the face of intensifying scholasticide of Palestinians,” she lamented.

Kobi Guillory, a 2019 graduate of the University of Chicago, also expressed solidarity with the university’s students and faculty members who are calling for the administration to divest from the “apartheid Israeli regime.” Guillory also advocated for the establishment of a Gaza Scholars at Risk initiative to support academics affected by the ongoing war.

“Instead of harassing, repressing, and evicting its students for standing up against the genocide in Palestine, the University of Chicago needs to stand on the right side of history and listen to the demands of its students and its faculty,” he added.

Faculty and Staff for Justice in Palestine at the University of Chicago also took to X to mobilize protesters for a demonstration outside the university's Stuart Hall on Tuesday.

The purpose of the gathering, it said, is to demonstrate dissatisfaction with the University of Chicago’s six-month delay in executing the promised “Gaza Scholars at Risk” program and to demand immediate action from the administration to ensure its implementation.

“During the student encampment, @UChicago made a written promise to announce and implement the Gaza Scholars at Risk Initiative to support scholars impacted by the US-Israel genocide of Palestinians in Gaza. Join us on Dec 3, 3:15 pm outside Stuart Hall to help make this happen!”

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