

*Trump administration cancels
\$400 million in funds to
Columbia University in New York
City*

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Trump claims university failed to protect Jewish students amid pro-Palestinian protests on campus

Washington, March 10 (RHC)-- The Donald Trump administration has announced that it has canceled \$400 million in federal grants and contracts to Columbia University in New York City because of what it alleges is the college's repeated failure to protect students from antisemitic harassment.

The announcement comes after Columbia set up a new disciplinary committee and initiated its own investigations into students critical of Israel and its war on Gaza after Hamas's own attack on Israel. That move by the university has alarmed advocates of free speech.

It also comes at a time of widespread backlash to American universities by the Trump administration and conservatives more broadly who see the higher education sector in the U.S. as dominated by liberals and ripe for a rightwing attack on its influence.

Linda McMahon, the Trump-appointed secretary of education, had warned on Monday that Columbia would lose federal funding if it did not take additional action to combat antisemitism on its campus.

A statement issued on Friday by the Department of Justice, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Education, and the U.S. General Services Administration, states: "These cancellations represent the first round of action and additional cancellations are expected to follow."

"For too long, Columbia has abandoned that obligation to Jewish students studying on its campus," McMahon said in the statement.

The statement also refers to ongoing "illegal protests" on college and university campuses, a phrase Trump has used to refer to some student protests, though what makes these illegal remains unclear.

Columbia was central to campus protests that broke out across the US over Gaza last spring. Pro-Palestinian demonstrators set up an encampment there in April and inspired a wave of similar protests in many other colleges.

The first amendment to the U.S. constitution protects the rights of people to "peacefully assemble" and to petition the government for a "redress of grievances."

The extent that pro-Palestinian demonstrations on campuses can be considered antisemitic is still debated across political and academic spheres. Republican lawmakers viewed the protests as antisemitic, despite the fact many protesters denied the accusations or were Jewish themselves.

Trump has threatened college students with imprisonment and deportation on Tuesday on his Truth Social platform, writing: "Agitators will be imprisoned/or permanently sent back to the country from which they came. American students will be permanently expelled or, depending on the crime, arrested."

A Columbia University spokesperson wrote in a statement to the Columbia Spectator, that it was "reviewing the announcement from the federal agencies and [pledged] to work with the federal government to restore Columbia's federal funding."

"We take Columbia's legal obligations seriously and understand how serious this announcement is and are committed to combatting antisemitism and ensuring the safety and wellbeing of our students, faculty, and staff," the spokesperson wrote.

It is not immediately clear what contracts or grants would be cut under the directive. Columbia University currently holds more than \$5 billion in federal grant commitments, the GSA statement said.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, told The Associated Press the move was unconstitutional and meant to stop student's "advocacy that isn't MAGA-approved, like criticizing Israel or supporting Palestinian rights."

Kenneth Roth, former executive director of Human Rights Watch, added that while Trump "claims to be protecting Jews" by pushing Columbia to take more aggressive action against Palestinian rights supporters, "this is clearly about suppressing criticism of Israeli war crimes."

The news came days after U.S. Senate Republicans held the latest hearing on what they claim is antisemitism on college campuses. One Jewish student at Tufts University, Meirav Solomon, who was invited by Democrats to testify at the hearing, pointed out that Trump's gutting of the Department of Education has left all students without a way to lodge complaints of discrimination with the agency's Office of Civil Rights — eliminating “a crucial avenue for Jews and other minorities to advocate for our rights.”

Meanwhile, noted Solomon, Republicans on the committee had nothing to say about Trump ally Elon Musk's apparent Nazi salute at an inauguration event in January.

On Friday, the advocacy group Bend the Arc: Jewish Action said Trump's cancellation of Columbia's grants, “falsely in the name of Jewish safety, actively puts Jews in danger.”

“History has shown that a strong democracy is what keeps Jews safest,” said the group. “At the core of strong democracies are free speech and education.”

Katherine Franke, a retired legal scholar and former professor at Columbia Law School told the Guardian how she was “pushed out” of her role in January because of her pro-Palestinian activism. She had been with Columbia for 25 years.

Franke says that the university was told “unless we as faculty and students take a pro-Israeli position, it [the university] will be sanctioned. And at the same time, the university is now committing itself to something it's calling institutional neutrality.”

She says that though not all the grants were cut, the Trump administration did “cut a significant part of them, and the important research that's being done with those grants will stop.”

Franke is highly critical of the way Columbia is responding to the threats from Trump, believing the institution could have done more to protect students, faculty and the pivotal role the university plays in a democracy.

“If you grovel before a bully, it just emboldens the bully, and the bully has now become an authoritarian government with the capacity to act on a level that was unthinkable for us a couple of years ago,” she said.

Columbia is one of five colleges currently under the new federal investigation, and it is one of 10 being visited by a taskforce in response to allegations of antisemitism. Others under investigation include the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Minnesota; Northwestern University; and Portland State University.

[SOURCE: COMMON DREAMS and THE GUARDIAN]

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