



June 13, 2013

**VIA U.S. MAIL & FACSIMILE**

Thomas E. Perez  
Assistant Attorney General  
United States Department of Justice  
Civil Rights Division  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20530-0001  
Fax: (202) 514-8337

Seth Galanter  
Acting Assistant Secretary  
United States Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202-1100  
Fax: 202-453-6012

**Re: Protecting Students' Constitutional Rights in Light of the Resolution Agreement Between the University of Montana and the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education**

Dear Assistant Attorney General Perez and Acting Assistant Secretary Galanter:

We represent a broad coalition of religious, conservative, and independent student and faculty organizations on public university campuses nationwide. Our organizations write to express our serious concern about the Resolution Agreement and Letter of Findings (collectively, the "Agreement") entered into by the University of Montana (UM), the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), and the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) regarding the handling of sexual assault and harassment cases on the Missoula campus. We stand against sexual assault and harassment on campus, and our student and faculty members are those who are least likely to commit such acts. But our groups also have a particular concern with protecting freedom of speech on campus, because we are often discriminatorily denied that right by public universities.

The Agreement claims to be “a blueprint for colleges and universities throughout the country”<sup>1</sup> and specifically requires UM to enact an overbroad and vague anti-harassment policy that will violate the constitutional rights of students. The harassment definitions and disciplinary procedures are the focus of our letter. While public universities must protect students from sexual assault and harassment, the Agreement ignores binding precedent defining harassment and restricts too much protected speech and academic freedom. We urge you to publicly repudiate the Agreement and set forth how DOJ and DOE intend to protect students’ constitutional rights going forward under the “blueprint.”

### **I. Broad Harassment Policies at Public Universities, Like the One Mandated by the Agreement, Violate the Constitution.**

While the state may choose protect citizens from actual harassment, there “is no categorical ‘harassment exception’ to the First Amendment’s Free Speech Clause.” *Rodriguez v. Maricopa Cnty. Cmty. Coll. Dist.*, 605 F.3d 703, 708 (9th Cir. 2010) (quoting *Saxe v. State Coll. Area Sch. Dist.*, 240 F.3d 200, 204 (3d Cir. 2001) (Alito, J.)). “The First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech does not extend only to categories of speech that survive an ad hoc balancing of relative social costs and benefits.” *United States v. Stevens*, 130 S. Ct. 1577, 1585 (2010). In fact, from “1791 to the present, . . . the First Amendment has permitted restrictions upon the content of speech in a few limited areas, and has never included a freedom to disregard these traditional limitations.” *Id.* at 1584 (internal quotation marks and citations omitted). Thus, speech is protected, unless it constitutes obscenity, incitement, or fighting words. *Brown v. Entm’t Merch. Ass’n*, 131 S. Ct. 2729, 2733 (2011).

Despite these guarantees, our coalition knows all too well that for more than twenty years, public universities have attempted to regulate student and faculty speech through unconstitutional speech codes.<sup>2</sup> A speech code is the common term for public college regulations that prohibit speech the Constitution protects. Designed to broadly prohibit so-called “offensive” or “harassing” communications, these codes have chilled free speech at campuses from coast to coast. Facially vague and overbroad, they deter untold thousands of students and faculty at public universities from speaking freely on critical issues of race, gender, sexuality, and religion. Arbitrarily enforced, they tend to become weapons of the dominant political culture, wielded against dissenters in an effort to replace the “marketplace of ideas” with an ideological monopoly.

From the inception of speech codes at public universities in the 1980s, courts have uniformly rejected them, both facially and as-applied. *See McCauley v. Univ. of V.I.*, 618 F.3d

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Anurima Bhargava, U.S. Dep’t of Justice, et al., to Royce Engstrom, President of Univ. of Mont., et al. (May 9, 2013), at 1, available at <http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/edu/documents/montanaletter.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Azhar Majeed, *Defying the Constitution The Rise, Persistence, and Prevalence of Campus Speech Codes*, 7 GEO. J.L. & PUB. POL’Y 481, 486 (2009); Alan Charles Kors & Harvey A. Silverglate, *THE SHADOW UNIVERSITY, THE BETRAYAL OF LIBERTY ON AMERICA’S CAMPUSES* (1998).

232 (3d Cir. 2010) (holding unconstitutional student conduct code that was applied to student alleged to have harassed another student who accused his friend of rape); *DeJohn v. Temple Univ.*, 537 F.3d 301 (3d Cir. 2008) (enjoining sexual harassment policy); *Saxe*, 240 F.3d 200 (striking down overbroad anti-harassment regulations in Pennsylvania public high school); *Cohen v. San Bernardino Valley Coll.*, 92 F.3d 968 (9th Cir. 1996) (finding college sexual harassment policy vague as-applied to professor's speech); *Dambrot v. Cent. Mich. Univ.*, 55 F.3d 1177 (6th Cir. 1995) (holding discriminatory harassment policy unconstitutionally vague); *Iota Xi Chapter of Sigma Chi Fraternity v. George Mason Univ.*, 993 F.2d 386 (4th Cir. 1993) (holding public university violated the First Amendment when it punished students for creating a hostile educational environment after they conducted an "ugly woman contest"); *Coll. Republicans at S.F. State Univ. v. Reed*, 523 F. Supp. 2d 1005 (N.D. Cal. 2007) (enjoining student conduct code that mandated civility); *Roberts v. Haragan*, 346 F. Supp. 2d 853, 872 (N.D. Tex. 2004) (enjoining overbroad university speech code that prohibited "threats, insults, epithets, ridicule, or personal attacks" by students); *Bair v. Shippensburg Univ.*, 280 F. Supp. 2d 357 (M.D. Pa. 2003) (enjoining enforcement of overbroad "cultural diversity and racism" policy statement); *UWM Post, Inc. v. Bd. of Regents of Univ. of Wis. Sys.*, 774 F. Supp. 1163 (E.D. Wis. 1991) (ruling that policy prohibiting discriminatory epithets was overbroad and vague); *Doe v. Univ. of Mich.*, 721 F. Supp. 852 (E.D. Mich. 1989) (enjoining overbroad and vague discrimination and harassment speech code); *Boober v. Bd. of Regents, N. Kentucky Univ.*, No. 96-135, 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 11404, at \*1 (E.D. Ky. July 22, 1998) (finding Northern Kentucky University's "sexual harassment policy facially invalid under the First Amendment due to vagueness and overbreadth"); *Corry v. Leland Stanford Junior Univ.*, No. 740309 (Cal. Super. Ct. Feb. 27, 1995) (slip opinion) (finding private university's speech policies unconstitutionally overbroad under California's Leonard Law).

Put simply, "state colleges and universities are not enclaves immune from the sweep of the First Amendment." *Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169, 180 (1972). But the terms of the Agreement mandate such a broad and vague definition of "harassment" that it suffers from the same constitutional defects as the speech code cases reported above. Indeed, not once in your Agreement do you mention this case law, and the only time you mention the Supreme Court's standard for actionable harassment on campus, you dismiss it.<sup>3</sup> Such carelessness in your "blueprint" will expose universities to liability for violating students' constitutional rights.

## II. The Harassment Policy Mandated by the Agreement Is Unconstitutionally Overbroad.

The "First Amendment needs breathing space and [policies] attempting to restrict or burden the exercise of First Amendment rights must be narrowly drawn." *Broadrick v. Oklahoma*, 413 U.S. 601, 611-12 (1973). "A regulation of speech may be struck down on its

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Anurima Bhargava to Royce Engstrom, *supra* note 1, at 5 n.8.

face if its prohibitions are sufficiently overbroad – that is, if it reaches too much expression that is protected by the Constitution.” *DeJohn*, 537 F.3d at 314.

The Agreement requires UM and urges other universities to create new policies that “broadly define[]” sexual harassment as “*any* unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature,”<sup>4</sup> which “can include . . . other verbal . . . conduct.”<sup>5</sup> These operative terms are substantially overbroad and encompass speech and behavior that is perfectly legal and innocuous. Courts around the country have struck down similar policies.

For example, in *DeJohn v. Temple University*, the Third Circuit struck down a sexual harassment policy that prohibited “all forms of sexual harassment” including “expressive” and “visual” conduct. 537 F.3d at 305. The court found the policy overbroad and subjective because it “could conceivably be applied to cover any speech” “the content of which offends someone.” *Id.* at 317. “This could include ‘core’ political and religious speech, such as gender politics and sexual morality.” *Id.*

Building on this precedent, the Third Circuit later struck down portions of a university student code of conduct that were used to punish a student for his alleged harassment of an individual who accused his friend of rape. *McCauley*, 618 F.3d 232. The university charged the student with committing an act that “injures, frightens, demeans, degrades or disgraces any person,” including sexual harassment. *Id.* at 237. The Third Circuit noted the lower court properly found this policy overbroad, and also enjoined enforcement of other student code provisions that banned speech which causes “offensive” or “emotional distress.” *Id.* at 247-52.

Similarly, in *Dambrot v. Central Michigan University*, the Sixth Circuit held that a university’s discriminatory harassment policy, which prohibited “any intentional, [or] unintentional” “verbal, or nonverbal behavior,” was substantially overbroad. 55 F.3d at 1182. The court called the policy’s language “sweeping” and “seemingly drafted to include as much and as many types of conduct as possible.” *Id.* The Agreement is similar in its requirement that universities “broadly define” sexual harassment as “any unwelcome conduct.”

Finally, in *Doe v. University of Michigan*, a federal district court ruled that a discriminatory harassment policy that banned “any behavior, verbal or physical” that “creates an intimidating, hostile or demeaning environment for educational pursuits” was unconstitutionally overbroad. 721 F. Supp. at 856. The fact that administrators “saw no First Amendment problem” with investigating students for innocuous violations of the policy demonstrated the policy’s overbreadth. *Id.* at 865.

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 8 (emphasis added).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 4.

While the Agreement's harassment standard is derived from the Title IX administrative enforcement standard and the Title IV injunctive standard,<sup>6</sup> that does not render it constitutional. *See, e.g., UWM Post*, 774 F. Supp. at 1177 ("Since Title VII is only a statute, it cannot supersede the requirements of the First Amendment."); *Boober*, 1998 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 11404, at \*22 (finding the same with respect to Title IX). The Agreement's ban on "any unwelcome conduct," including "verbal conduct," is unconstitutional because, as the Supreme Court has reiterated, "much political and religious speech might be perceived as offensive to some," *Morse v. Frederick*, 551 U.S. 393, 409 (2007), but it is still protected speech.

The Agreement also requires UM and encourages other universities to eschew a reasonableness standard in sexual harassment policies. In fact, it criticizes UM's former policy for "improperly suggest[ing] that the conduct does not constitute sexual harassment unless it is objectively offensive."<sup>7</sup> DOJ and DOE assert that objectivity is "not the standard to determine whether conduct was" sexual harassment. But the Departments' assertions do not accurately reflect the various courts' decisions to the contrary. In *DeJobn*, the Third Circuit held that a much narrower sexual harassment policy than the one proposed by the Agreement was unconstitutional even though it contained an "objective" standard, because it "does not necessarily follow that speech which effects an unreasonable interference with an individual's work justifies restricting another's First Amendment freedoms." 537 F.3d at 319. While a university has a compelling interest in preventing actual harassment, "unless harassment is qualified with a standard akin to a severe or pervasive requirement, a harassment policy may suppress core protected speech." *Id.* at 319-20. Thus, a harassment policy lacking an objective standard for evaluation of the speech and conduct will violate students' rights.

Even more troubling, DOJ and DOE instruct universities to exclude a severity and pervasiveness standard in sexual harassment policies. The Agreement condemns UM's former policy because it "incorrectly implies that sexual harassment must be both 'severe *and* pervasive' to establish a hostile environment."<sup>8</sup> Instead, you claim the policy may prohibit only "severe *or* pervasive" harassment.<sup>9</sup> The difference between these standards is the restriction of more protected speech.

According to the Supreme Court, to avoid conflict with other constitutional rights, schools are only responsible for deliberate indifference to sexual harassment, of which they have actual knowledge, that is "so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive, and that so undermines and detracts from the victims' educational experience, that the victim-students

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.*

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* (emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* (emphasis in original).

are *effectively denied equal access to an institution's resources and opportunities.*" *Davis v. Monroe Cnty. Bd. of Educ.*, 526 U.S. 629, 651 (1999) (emphasis added). The Court noted, however, that even this standard may be too strict in a college setting. "A university might not, for example, be expected to exercise the same degree of control over its students that a grade school would enjoy, and it would be entirely reasonable for a school to refrain from a form of disciplinary action that would expose it to constitutional or statutory claims." *Id.* at 649 (citing *id.* at 667-68 (Kennedy, J., dissenting)); see also *McCauley*, 618 F.3d at 242 ("Public university administrators are granted *less leeway* in regulating student speech than are public elementary or high school administrators.") (emphasis in original). The Court's majority was responding to the dissent's valid concern that a less strict standard will restrict protected speech. Indeed,

a university's power to discipline its students for speech that may constitute sexual harassment is also circumscribed by the First Amendment. A number of federal courts have already confronted difficult problems raised by university speech codes designed to deal with peer sexual and racial harassment. See, e.g., *Dambrot v. Central Mich. Univ.*, 55 F.3d 1177 (C.A.6 1995) (striking down university discriminatory harassment policy because it was overbroad, vague, and not a valid prohibition on fighting words); *UWM Post, Inc. v. Board of Regents of Univ. of Wis. System*, 774 F. Supp. 1163 (E.D.Wis.1991) (striking down university speech code that prohibited, inter alia, "discriminatory comments" directed at an individual that "intentionally ... demean" the "sex ... of the individual" and "[c]reate an intimidating, hostile or demeaning environment for education, university related work, or other university-authorized activity"); *Doe v. University of Mich.*, 721 F. Supp. 852 (E.D.Mich.1989) (similar); *IOTA XI Chapter of Sigma Chi Fraternity v. George Mason Univ.*, 993 F.2d 386 (C.A.4 1993) (overturning on First Amendment grounds university's sanctions on a fraternity for conducting an "ugly woman contest" with "racist and sexist" overtones). The difficulties associated with speech codes simply underscore the limited nature of a university's control over student behavior that may be viewed as sexual harassment.

*Id.* at 667-68 (Kennedy, J., dissenting). While DOJ and DOE may contend their administrative enforcement standards allow a broader definition of harassment, the First Amendment does not. In *DeJohn*, the Third Circuit followed *Davis* and held that "unless harassment is qualified with a standard akin to a severe or pervasive requirement, a harassment policy may suppress core protected speech." 537 F.3d at 320. The Agreement's rejection of a severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive standard exposes UM and other universities to liability for restricting protected speech.

### **III. The Harassment Policy Mandated by the Agreement Is Unconstitutionally Vague.**

A university policy is unconstitutionally vague when persons “of common intelligence must necessarily guess at its meaning.” *Broadrick*, 413 U.S. at 607. Vague policies violate the First Amendment in three ways. First, they fail to provide “fair warning” as to what is permitted and prohibited. *Cohen*, 92 F.3d at 972 (citing *Grayned v. City of Rockford*, 408 U.S. 104, 108-109 (1972)). Second, they “delegate basic policy matters to low level officials for resolution on an ad hoc and subjective basis, with the attendant dangers of arbitrary and discriminatory application.” *Id.* And, third, they discourage the exercise of First Amendment freedoms. *Id.*

Policies that lack such clarity have been routinely struck down by courts, because what is “unwelcome” or “offensive” varies from one person to another. In *Dambrot*, the Sixth Circuit held the discriminatory harassment policy was unconstitutionally vague because it did not provide fair warning of what speech will violate the policy and delegated to university officials the task of defining what is “offensive.” 55 F.3d at 1184. “Though some statements might be seen as universally offensive, different people find different things offensive.” *Id.* To avoid being void for vagueness, policies must contain precise definitions of what is prohibited so that students have sufficient notice of what expression is subject to the policies. But these policies may not discriminate based on the content or viewpoint of speech. The Agreement does not provide any definitions of its operative ban on “unwelcome” speech. It is so undefined that students, let alone administrators charged with its enforcement, will differ as what constitutes a violation. This leaves universities with the enormous, and unbridled, administrative burden of policing what is and is not actionable harassment. Free speech will suffer in the end.

### **IV. The Harassment Policy Mandated by the Agreement Violates Students’ Due Process.**

The Due Process Clause “forbids arbitrary deprivations of liberty.” *Goss v. Lopez*, 419 U.S. 565, 574 (1975). “At the very minimum, therefore, students facing suspension . . . must be given some kind of notice and afforded some kind of hearing.” *Id.* at 579. Only when students present a “continuing danger to persons or property” may they be immediately suspended from school. *Id.* at 582. But a hearing must immediately follow the suspension. *Id.* at 582-83.

The Agreement provides that “a university must take immediate steps to protect” a party complaining of harassment, even “taking disciplinary action against the harasser” before investigation of the complaint begins.<sup>10</sup> But the Agreement fails to require UM and

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 6.

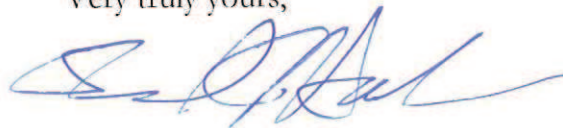
other universities to show “continuing danger to persons or property,” or to provide notice and a hearing immediately following the disciplinary action. As one commentator noted already, this is “reminiscent of Alice in Wonderland’s ‘sentence first, verdict afterwards.’”<sup>11</sup> But a mere investigation into clearly protected activity violates the Constitution. *See White v. Lee*, 227 F.3d 1214, 1228 (9th Cir. 2000) (holding U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development investigation into protected activity violated First Amendment). The Agreement requires UM and other universities to violate students’ due process.

## V. Conclusion

There is no question that universities like UM should protect students from actual harassment, but they can do so and comply with the First Amendment under a severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive standard. The Agreement’s broad definition of harassment, however, fails to protect real victims. Their cries for help will be drowned out by frivolous complaints of insults, teasing, jokes, and other clearly protected activity. In the end, that leaves speech chilled and victims without justice.

Our coalition is all too familiar with restrictive campus speech codes and the danger they pose to the “marketplace of ideas.” *Healy*, 408 U.S. at 180. Public universities should invite robust debate and dialogue on every conceivable issue, be open to the widest possible array of ideas and views, and adopt policies that encourage the fullest possible exercise of First Amendment freedoms. The Agreement violates that mandate. We urge you to clarify the standards set forth in the Agreement and undo the national speech code it currently proposes.

Very truly yours,



Kevin H. Theriot, Senior Counsel  
Director of Education Project  
David J. Hacker, Senior Legal Counsel  
ALLIANCE DEFENDING FREEDOM

Ron Robinson  
President  
YOUNG AMERICA’S FOUNDATION

[Signatories continued on next page]

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<sup>11</sup> George Will, “Alice in Wonderland” Coercion, HUMAN EVENTS, May 25, 2013, <http://www.humanevents.com/2013/05/25/alice-in-wonderland-coercion/> (quoting Hans Bader).



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Acting Assistant Secretary Galanter  
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Peter Wood  
President  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOLARS

Kristan Hawkins  
President  
STUDENTS FOR LIFE OF AMERICA

Rick Schenker  
President  
RATIO CHRISTI

Gary Holtz  
North American Coordinator  
CAMPUS BIBLE FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL

Bill Gilles  
National Director  
COLLEGIANS FOR A CONSTRUCTIVE TOMORROW

Jason Hoyt  
President & Chief Operating Officer  
BETA UPSILON CHI, INC.