

October 23, 2025

**Statement of the AAUP-Penn Executive Committee on Academic Freedom and Penn's Title VI Office
(OREI)**

As the executive committee of the University of Pennsylvania's chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP-Penn), we write to express our concern that the practices of Penn's Office of Religious and Ethnic Interests—formerly “Inclusion”—(OREI) or Title VI office may infringe upon [academic freedom](#) and may themselves constitute unlawful discrimination. Given OREI's [stated intent](#) to work in partnership across the Penn community, we write publicly to give the office the opportunity to clarify and modify its procedures to ensure the transparency, consistency, and fairness essential to carrying out the office's mission.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act was a crowning achievement of the Black freedom movement in the United States, and it is worth remembering its origins and purpose. The law banned a host of discriminatory practices that had barred African Americans from decent jobs, schools, hospitals, restaurants, and other institutions serving the public. Among the law's provisions, Title VI bars discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin in programs that receive federal funding; since 2004, federal guidance has also [interpreted Title VI](#) to prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion, protecting students who are “Jewish, Israeli, Muslim, Arab, Sikh, South Asian, Hindu, Palestinian, or any other faith or ancestry.”

Because the Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination on the basis of many factors, it opened doors not only to African Americans but to many other racialized groups in the United States, as well as women of many racial and ethnic backgrounds. It made the United States a more just and egalitarian society, it improved the quality of higher education, and the [AAUP has consistently supported the law](#), arguing that antidiscrimination measures must go hand-in-hand with the protection of academic freedom. As explained in a 2023 [statement](#) from AAUP, “equity and nondiscrimination will not be achieved if freedom of speech and academic freedom are compromised or legislated out of existence.” It is the free exchange and exploration of ideas, including those that are unpopular or that some might find offensive, that enables universities to contribute to societal progress.

Today, the Trump administration is weaponizing the 1964 Civil Rights Act to authorize discrimination, censorship, and violations of academic freedom. As [the AAUP has noted](#), corroborated by senior U.S. district court judge William G. Young in the recent [AAUP v. Rubio ruling](#), the administration relies on an overly broad and vague definition of antisemitism that falsely includes criticism of the Israeli government and the war in Gaza, which chills research, teaching, and debate. As Judge Allison D. Burroughs [found in Harvard case](#), the federal government “used antisemitism as a smokescreen for a targeted, ideologically-motivated assault on this country's premier universities.” The Trump administration is, in unprecedented ways, [repurposing Title VI](#) to control what can be taught and studied in the United States; roll back the gains of the civil rights movement; and infringe on the rights to speak, assemble, and protest.

Here at Penn, the OREI was established as the university's Title VI office in December 2024 amid a climate of [government interference into university procedures](#). We are concerned that Penn's own Title VI

office may be responding to these external pressures in a manner that risks chilling faculty speech and potentially discriminating against faculty in violation of the law.

Over the last several months, AAUP-Penn has received reports from faculty and students with whom OREI has initiated meetings. In several cases, AAUP-Penn representatives have accompanied colleagues, at their request, to these meetings. Based on our observations, it appears that Penn's Title VI office initiates meetings that may be based on unfounded accusations of antisemitism in a faculty member's research, teaching, or extramural speech. While the below includes examples from specific cases, shared with permission, our intention is to illuminate broader trends, not to reopen any individual case.

Examples of actions by faculty that have prompted OREI meetings include: assigning a pedagogically-relevant reading about conflict in Palestine in a course; conducting peer-reviewed, scholarly research that referenced a third-party resource that a complainant claimed, without evidence, promoted hatred of Israel and of Jews in the United States; being photographed at an off-campus event wearing a stole bearing the Palestinian flag; and political posts on personal social media accounts. In some cases, these complaints originated in campaigns of [targeted harassment](#) orchestrated by groups outside the university, raising concerns that the Title VI office is being used as an instrument of harassment. During these meetings, faculty members, who in some cases had already been subject to targeted harassment, felt that they were expected to take unsubstantiated accusations of antisemitism at face value and to express contrition or offer some concession to their unidentified accuser, or face the possibility of disciplinary action. We have also received reports that OREI has initiated meetings with members of the Penn community based on the university administration's surveillance of their social media, without having received any complaint, and has warned them preemptively not to criticize the Israeli government.

The Title VI office has said that they do not investigate complaints that come from outside the university, but even if this is true, it has not prevented targeted harassment campaigns from turning into Title VI investigations at Penn. It appears that members of the Penn community may have responded to or participated in targeted harassment campaigns by bringing their accusations to OREI, in effect laundering external harassment into internal expressions of concern, and prompting OREI to initiate meetings with faculty based on the fact that they are being harassed online. From our observations, those meetings or investigations have not resulted in discipline, suggesting the weakness of the accusations, but they have put immense strain on members of the university already experiencing harassment and pose threats to the academic freedom of all faculty and students.

Threats to Academic Freedom

Even when meetings do not result in further investigation or disciplinary action, summoning faculty members every time the office receives a complaint, however unsubstantiated, chills faculty members' research, teaching, and intramural and extramural speech. These meetings can induce faculty members to modify their scholarship and teaching in order to avoid further investigation and possible discipline. For instance, in one meeting, a faculty member whose peer-reviewed research was subject to a complaint was pressured to make a modification to the presentation of that research although their work had the support of their colleagues and dean.

We ask that OREI leadership publicly address the following questions:

- 1. Does the Title VI office initiate meetings with members of the university every time it receives a complaint about them? If not, what criteria does the office use to distinguish between complaints that it pursues and those that it does not?**
- 2. How many complaints has the Title VI office received from people outside the university and from members of the university, and how many of each of those complaints have led to meetings? How many meetings have been initiated without any complaint?**
- 3. What policies and procedures does the Title VI office have in place to prevent external complainants from influencing internal processes? What policies and procedures does the office have in place to prevent itself from being used as an instrument of campaigns of targeted harassment?**
- 4. When OREI receives a complaint that originates in a campaign of targeted harassment, or when it learns that a member of the university has been subject to targeted harassment, what forms of support does it offer? How does it protect the academic freedom of all from the chilling effect of targeted harassment?**
- 5. What training do OREI staff members receive on the principles of academic freedom, academic due process, and shared governance? What do they understand to be the rights of faculty and students under the principles of academic freedom, and what do they understand to be the limits of OREI's authority in relation to the protection of academic freedom?**

Procedural Fairness, Due Process, and Adherence to University Policies

Based on faculty members' experiences and our observations, AAUP-Penn is concerned that OREI's procedures appear to be inconsistent, opaque, and in some cases, unfair, intimidating, or unauthorized by the university's written policies.

- In the cases that have come to our attention, the faculty members received emails urgently calling for a meeting with an OREI representative, with no information provided about the topic of the meeting or their rights. In one case, during the meeting, the faculty member and accompanying AAUP-Penn member had to ask repeatedly for any information on the substance of the complaint.
- One faculty member was denied their request to be accompanied by a colleague, while in another case, a colleague from AAUP-Penn was allowed to attend but not to speak or ask any questions.
- OREI has typically distinguished its first meetings with faculty members from investigations: the first meeting may result in an investigation depending on what the faculty member says. Yet in one case, a faculty member asked to postpone their meeting in order to allow them time to obtain counsel. OREI responded by escalating the case from a meeting to a formal investigation, despite the fact that there had been no changes to the facts of the case. It appears that OREI used the investigation itself as a form of punishment and intimidation when a faculty member asserted their rights.

- In several cases, OREI questioned the faculty member's supervisors and colleagues about a complaint without notifying the faculty member themselves of any official investigation, and possibly before any investigation commenced.
- OREI investigations do not appear to follow regular or transparent procedures. In one case, OREI called in a faculty member who had been subject to targeted harassment for over a year. In the meeting, OREI staff invoked previous irregular and opaque investigations of this colleague that had no basis in the Faculty Handbook. Although the faculty member had never been found to have violated any policy, OREI invoked these investigations as if they showed a pattern of inappropriate conduct rather than a pattern of targeted harassment.
- In its public relations, OREI has emphasized its role in providing education, mediation, and conflict resolution. While attorneys, including former prosecutors, may have investigatory and fact-finding skills useful in carrying out a Title VI office's mission, procedural safeguards are critical to ensure fairness and transparency, especially given the potentially harmful consequences to faculty members against whom complaints are lodged. Faculty members have reported concern that complaints against them were not subject to critical evaluation, and faculty members facing unsubstantiated accusations of antisemitism felt pressured to express contrition or make changes to their research, teaching, or extramural speech, or face escalating investigation and/or discipline.
- Establishing transparent procedures for reporting to the Penn community on the Title VI office's activities, and for informing faculty, staff, and students of our rights to request and receive information from the office would be an important step toward ensuring fair treatment in keeping with the office's mission.

We ask that OREI leadership publicly address the following questions:

- 6. What rights do members of the university have in Title VI meetings, investigations, and other processes? Where are those rights and procedures published?**
- 7. Do OREI procedures authorize its staff to interview other members of the university about a complaint before notifying the subject of the complaint that they are being investigated, or before opening an investigation?**
- 8. Do OREI procedures authorize its staff to invoke or consider past accusations against or investigations of a member of the university (whether or not those investigations were formally authorized by the Faculty Handbook) that are not part of the complaint?**
- 9. What is the job description of the former prosecutor in the Title VI office? What decisions do they make or participate in? What is their relationship to the Office of the General Counsel?**
- 10. When and in what format will OREI formally report to Penn faculty, staff, and students on its activity?**

Privacy

In 2024, the Penn administration [voluntarily turned over personally identifying information](#) about faculty members to a Congressional committee that made unsubstantiated accusations of antisemitism. Since then, other universities have followed suit. UC Berkeley, for example, recently provided the federal government with names of university community members investigated for antisemitism, regardless of

the source or reliability of the complaint or the outcome of the investigations. The AAUP has [warned against such practices](#).

We ask that OREI leadership publicly address the following questions:

- 11. In light of OREI's statement that they investigate every report, are all meetings defined as investigations for recordkeeping, reporting, or other purposes?**
- 12. What records, and what personally identifying information, are produced in the course of OREI's activities, when OREI receives and evaluates complaints, when it meets with a member of the university, when it conducts investigations, and when it makes recommendations to the central administration?**
- 13. What policies and procedures govern the preservation, destruction, and transmission of OREI's documents? What policies and procedures does OREI implement to protect the privacy, including personally identifying information, of Penn community members?**

The Use of Overly Broad and Vague Definitions of Antisemitism

All of the cases that have been reported to us involve complaints against members of the university accused of antisemitism or criticism of Israel, which were sometimes conflated. In one meeting where an OREI staff member said that a social media post could be interpreted as antisemitic, they were asked what definition of antisemitism OREI used, since the post did not include any generalizations or stereotypes about Jews. The OREI representative responded that Penn has not adopted a definition of antisemitism, but that OREI must respect that members of the university might use different definitions. Those various definitions appear to include the IHRA definition, which the AAUP has identified as a [threat to academic freedom](#). If OREI acts on reports made on the basis of the IHRA definition, the office is in effect accepting that definition. The Title VI office cannot adjudicate cases based on the definition of discrimination used by the complainant; [as explained by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights](#), "the offensiveness of a particular expression as perceived by some students, standing alone, is not a legally sufficient basis to establish a hostile environment under Title VI."

We ask that OREI leadership publicly address the following questions:

- 14. What definition of antisemitism does OREI use, and for what purposes?**
- 15. When OREI receives a complaint of antisemitism that appears to be founded on the IHRA definition of antisemitism, does it initiate a meeting with the member of the university who is the object of the complaint?**
- 16. How many and what percentage of OREI's meetings, and how many and what percentage of its investigations, have been based on complaints about alleged antisemitism? On what definition of antisemitism were each of those complaints, and OREI's responses to them, based? How many of those complaints have conflated antisemitism with political criticism of the Israeli government, the war in Gaza, or Zionism as a political project? How many of those complaints have conflated antisemitism with expressions of support or sympathy for Palestinian people?**

Possible Unlawful Discrimination by OREI

The reports that we have received come almost exclusively from faculty who are Palestinian, Arab, Muslim, and/or Black. We are concerned that the Title VI office may be subjecting members of protected classes to disproportionate surveillance, interrogation, investigation, or threats of discipline, and therefore that the Title VI office itself may be discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, or religion.

We ask that OREI leadership publicly address the following questions:

- 17. Will the Title VI office release data on the race, color, national origin, and religion of members of the university (a) called in for meetings and (b) subject to investigations?**
- 18. Has OREI received or investigated any reports of anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, or anti-Palestinian racism? If no such reports have been received, what steps has OREI taken to earn the trust of Penn community members subject to all forms of discrimination protected by Title VI? How is OREI working to ensure that its processes are not used as a vehicle for anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Palestinian racism?**

Penn must not engage in anticipatory obedience by censoring community members whose intellectual work or extramural speech may make them ideological targets. It must resist the attempts of politicians, donors, and trustees to make the 1964 Civil Rights Act an instrument of discrimination and censorship. Combatting antisemitism, upholding democracy, and protecting free speech and academic freedom are [intertwined](#). Harassing, surveilling, intimidating, and punishing members of the University community for research, teaching, and extramural speech based on overly broad definitions of antisemitism does nothing to combat antisemitism, but it can perpetuate anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Palestinian racism, muzzle political criticism of the Israeli government by people of any background, and create a climate of fear and self-censorship that threatens the academic freedom of all faculty and students. As 550 US rabbis and cantors stated in a recent [public letter](#), “We cannot allow the fight against antisemitism to be twisted into a wedge issue, used to justify policies that target immigrants and other minorities, suppress free speech, or erode democratic norms.”

AAUP-Penn will continue to monitor reports related to OREI, working with campus partners to ensure that the vital work of preventing and responding to discrimination based on race, color, and national origin proceeds in ways that apply equitably to all members of the faculty community, adhere to internal grievance and complaint procedures required by the Faculty Handbook, and uphold Penn’s obligation to protect academic freedom. We look forward to the Office’s response to these questions.