

May 3, 2024

Dear colleagues,

It's been two days since a tragic day in the history of our university. I write to you with a deep sense of solidarity for our three colleagues who were arrested, great pride in our students, and puzzlement about the mismatch between lofty rhetoric that those of us attending Academic Council heard from University leadership about freedom of speech earlier in the afternoon, on May 1, and subsequent events just a couple of hours later. I wish to share some of my own analysis and reflections on the day, and also to invite you to join me in signing an open letter (<https://forms.gle/5NvNAXBifaCpYcxk6>) to the UT Dallas administrative leadership, drafted by several of our colleagues, which calls on leadership to refrain from pursuing legal or other punitive actions against students and colleagues.

Our alma mater includes the following lines:

To inflame the scholar's heart  
Lighting pathways through the dark

In my opinion, our three colleagues, Ben Wright, Rosemary Admiral and Ali Asgar Alibhai, were embodying these lines when they were arrested. For a great and dedicated teacher, every crisis is a teachable moment. When I visited the entirely peaceful "encampment" early that morning, Ben was making the most of a teachable moment: sitting in a folding chair, teaching students about US government. I hope our senior administrators, most of whom started as teachers and scholars, still remember the rhythm to which a teacher's heart beats.

So, the "encampment" was deemed illegal, and laws have to be upheld. What about proportionality? Is unleashing a platoon of cops in full riot gear, accompanied by armored trucks which were fitted and filled with who knows what, necessary to arrest or disperse a few dozen unarmed students and professors? It would be unfortunate if in our zeal to be on the right side of the law, we end up on the wrong side of history.

To all our students in the "encampment" and outside it, who participated in the demonstrations, you made me so proud with your steadfast adherence to non-violence. Not a twig, nor a paper airplane, not even a paper clip was thrown at any of the cops. If only you had affixed carnations at the ends of their batons, history would have come full circle. You rightly asked the cops a burning question:

"There is no riot here;  
Why are you in riot gear?"

You knew your struggle was not with the police officers, who were simply doing what they were ordered to do, including possibly arrest you. You were questioning the judgement of those who invited them to campus. You were also respectful of your fellow students who were peacefully counter-protesting.

Police actions of the type that happened on May 1 take hours to plan and set into motion. This leads me to a very sobering realization. During the meeting of the Academic Council earlier that

afternoon, while the university leadership was speaking eloquently about protecting the freedom of speech, and the need to defuse tension, the police action may have already been approved and initiated. Tactical assault vehicles don't just "apparate" from the city of Allen to UTD campus. Who knew what, and how far in advance?

Our Speaker-elect, Michael Kesden, and I have directly emailed President Benson between the events of May 1 and now, and are still awaiting a response. Other than the campus-wide email sent on the evening of May 1, we have not heard anything.

Healing has to begin without delay. While all physical signs of the "encampment" are gone, as you can see in the photograph Michael Kesden took of the Chess Plaza around 11 am on May 2nd, all of us are still traumatized. Communication is the first step towards healing.



A petition (<https://forms.gle/5NvNAxBifaCpYcxk6>) has been created by some of our colleagues, requesting our President, Provost, Deans and other administrators to do the following:

- Drop or refrain from pressing legal charges against all individuals arrested on May 1
- Allow student activists to complete their semesters' coursework, without suspension, expulsion, or other punishment this semester, and without restricting their future options to enroll in classes or live in university housing
- Affirm that faculty who were detained will face no professional repercussions.

I have signed the petition. Please review the petition, and act as per your conscience.

Friends, it has been difficult for me to write this letter. The least we can do in such a crisis is honestly communicate with each other and rebuild bridges that may have crumbled.

I request our President and other senior administrators to vigorously re-engage with the campus community. You will find most faculty willing to work with you to help heal the wounds all of us have taken in the last few days. As I have said not so long ago, this is my UTD family, and this is your UTD family.

Finally, let us not lose sight of the real reason why several in our community are in a state of deep agitation: a few thousand miles from here, families on both sides are mourning the loss of loved ones, and dreading what tomorrow may have in store for them.

Yours sincerely,

Ravi Prakash  
Speaker of the Academic Senate