

President Jonathan Holloway, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
Testimony before the
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Committee on Education and the Workforce
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Chairwoman Foxx, Ranking Member Scott, Committee Members: Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today and to discuss Rutgers University’s experience in the months since the horrific terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023.

Rutgers is proud to be home to one of the largest Jewish student populations in America, and we condemn antisemitism in the strongest terms possible. We do so today, we did so long before October 7, and we will always do so.

I would like to provide a little information about my own background that is relevant to my testimony. My maternal great-grandfather, William Johnson Trent, was an early organizer of the Colored YMCA in Atlanta and served as president of Livingstone College in Salisbury, North Carolina. His son, Bill Trent, Jr., my grandfather, was dean of education at Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina, before becoming the founding executive director of the United Negro College Fund. My father, a career officer in the Air Force, was the first black person to teach at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama. I share this to make clear that a commitment to education and to providing access is in my DNA. And though I fully recognize the myriad ways in which my experience and that of our Jewish community are different, I know something about the awful impact of discrimination, too. When I served as an intern for the House Ethics Committee, my father brought me here to Capitol Hill on my first day. As we approached the committee offices, he stopped me and said: “When I was your age, the only way someone who looked like us could cross the threshold was if he were pushing a food cart.” This is part of the reason this discussion matters so much to me.

Background on Rutgers University

We are a university community of nearly 100,000 students, faculty, and staff, with nearly 600,000 alumni spread across the country and around the world. Founded in 1766 as the eighth college established in the American colonies, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is a comprehensive, multi-campus public research institution.

Rutgers takes pride in being a public university and all that it entails. We serve New Jersey and our nation through life-changing research and clinical care, and by educating tomorrow’s leaders. Our diverse student body includes a sizable percentage of undergraduates who are first-generation college students and come from low-income families. Rutgers prioritizes helping our students graduate on-time, with minimal debt, and on track to start fulfilling and successful careers.

Rutgers hosts a world-class Jewish scholarly community. We are one of only a few dozen universities in America with a Department of Jewish Studies. The Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, an internationally recognized leader in Jewish studies, holds public

lectures and cultural events, conducts teacher training on Holocaust education, hosts extracurricular programs for students majoring in Jewish Studies, sponsors visiting scholars, and hosts a long-standing annual Rutgers Jewish Film Festival. The Eva and Arie Halpern Hillel House and the Les Turchin Chabad House—both among the largest in higher education—sit in the heart of our Big Ten campus in New Brunswick.

Rutgers University is also home to the Miller Center on Policing and Community Resilience, which is dedicated to protecting vulnerable communities in the United States and around the world that are facing antisemitism or other forms of intolerance. The Miller Center came into existence as a reaction to the shocking rise in antisemitism in Europe and in our own country. Centers like this, committed to upholding our common humanity, can also help combat the pernicious influence that social media can have on civil discourse.

In 2020, Rutgers formed a partnership with Tel Aviv University (TAU)—one of many academic collaborations Rutgers has with universities around the world. In 2021, I traveled to Israel to sign a memorandum of understanding with TAU that created a research grant program to seed collaborations across disciplines and committed TAU to taking space at the Health and Life Science Exchange (HELIX) innovation district currently under construction next to our New Brunswick campus.

Responses Following the October 7 Attacks

The Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza have had a profound effect on the Rutgers University community. What Hamas did in brutally murdering, torturing, and holding hostage innocent Israeli victims of all ages was unconscionable and an act of terrorism. In the days following October 7, vigils were held by both Jewish and Muslim student organizations. I saw firsthand Rutgers' Jewish community suffering pain, anguish, and fear as they mourned the devastation of October 7. My heart continues to share in that pain. I too saw the concern for members of the university community with family and friends in Gaza at the vigil honoring the memory of those lost in the subsequent fighting.

I fervently hope for the sparing of innocent lives, the release of hostages, and a peaceful and just resolution to the war in Gaza as soon as possible.

Since October 7, we have prioritized the safety of our community, including through consistent communication with the Rutgers University Police Department (RUPD) and with local, county, and state level law enforcement. We have enhanced security across our campuses and increased police presence at sensitive areas. This includes increased patrols near the Hillel House and the Chabad House, and other religious and cultural spaces. The RUPD is present whenever there is a protest—around the clock if need be. We have also received briefings from the FBI on their threat assessments. We emphasize, repeatedly and consistently, how to report concerns of bias and harassment, and we are committed to following up on these reports.

Along with our efforts to ensure safety, the Rutgers administration took specific actions to support our Jewish students. We kept in regular contact throughout the year with the leaders of Rutgers Hillel and Chabad to discuss the concerns of our Jewish students and to help ensure their

well-being and security. We met with members of the Jewish Faculty, Administrators, and Staff (JFAS) organization at Rutgers to discuss their recommendations for addressing antisemitism and further supporting our Jewish students. On our New Brunswick campus, Chancellor Francine Conway formed an advisory council charged with assessing and improving campus life for Jewish students, faculty, and staff, as well as a task force to review procedures around codes of conduct and codes of ethics. Chancellor Conway also issued a forceful statement condemning antisemitism in response to the reported harassment of a Jewish student in one of our residence halls.

We have also sought to encourage dialogue. In a welcome message to all students returning to their studies in January, I wrote: “I ask you to think about how we, as members of the Rutgers community, can preserve our freedoms—how we can embrace them with the awesome responsibility they require: to be respectful and openminded, to be intellectually honest and curious, and to be civil, decent, and understanding of one another.” We’ve followed that up with programming, including a lecture series and film series on each of our campuses.

Commitment to Keeping Campus Safe

Our community members will not always agree on major social and geopolitical issues—the university should be a marketplace of ideas and competing visions—but our students should always expect to feel safe and secure. Equally important, our students, faculty, and staff deserve clear policies, reporting processes, and disciplinary support for addressing bias incidents should they occur.

To that end, a group of Rutgers administration leaders has held weekly and sometimes daily meetings since the fall to remain vigilant in monitoring student concerns. These meetings ensure that all facets—student affairs, university police, and central administration—are working together to protect and be responsive to our students.

Rutgers has been responding diligently to all reported incidents of antisemitism on its campuses. Our Office of Student Conduct thoroughly reviews and investigates bias incident reports and refers allegations of criminal conduct to the university police. Complaints that involve faculty or staff members are reviewed and, where appropriate, investigated by the university’s Office of Employment Equity. We take these matters very seriously, and bias incident reports are reviewed, investigated where appropriate, and acted upon when violations of our policies related to harassment, discrimination, disruption, and conduct have occurred.

Response to Spring 2024 Protest and Encampment

I’d like to now speak about the protest this spring and our response.

On April 29, participants in a sanctioned protest moved to the Voorhees Mall, a grassy area on the College Avenue Campus in New Brunswick. Shortly thereafter, protestors erected tents on Voorhees Mall.

Some people say I should have engaged police to clear the protest immediately and arrest those who resisted. Others say we should have listened and engaged more. The criticism from various quarters reflects the difficult, deeply felt, and divergent views of the war in Gaza. Our response to the protest was not based on viewpoint, but rather on principles.

Our guiding principles in responding to the protest were to maintain a safe and controlled environment, to protect Rutgers students, faculty, and staff and Rutgers property, and to assure that our students' academic progress—taking final exams and completing the semester—was not impeded.

These principles underpinned every decision we made.

At first the protest was peaceful, not unlike the tent protests in the same location that have been an on-again/off-again feature of the spring semester at Rutgers for twenty years or more.

On the morning of May 2, the first day of exams, the nature of the protest changed. Some student protestors had called overnight for a rally to disrupt the beginning of finals. It was at that moment that we decided the encampment had to be taken down. We notified the protestors that they had to clear the area by 4 pm or would be considered to have trespassed and would be removed. As we assembled 125 police officers that afternoon to execute on the order to decamp if necessary, the mall was becoming an unstable mixture of protestors and counter-protestors that we have seen far too often on other campuses. Some participants were our own students, faculty, and staff; others were outsiders in pursuit of their own goals and ambitions.

The university was prepared to engage police to clear the protest and arrest those who resisted. But I am grateful that we did not have to. We did not have to do so because we engaged students in a conversation that led to a peaceful resolution.

Many people have argued that Rutgers should not have engaged in discussions with the protestors. What I have said in response is that we talked with Rutgers students. They were, for the most part, New Jersey students: born in our state, educated in our high schools, and enrolled at their state university. They were not, as some have characterized them, terrorists; they were our students.

What the students asked for was consideration of several requests that concern academic and student affairs—a cultural center, trainings, course offerings. The Chancellor's Advisory Council on Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian Life, comprised of faculty, staff, and students, will address those requests. We were also asked to establish a relationship with Birzeit University. We already have one. It has been in place since 2022.

But I want to state emphatically what we did not do.

First and foremost, my administration did not agree to divest from companies that do business in Israel.

Divestment is a Board decision at Rutgers, not a presidential one, but I have nevertheless made very clear to Rutgers students my own viewpoint: I believe the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement is wrong. I think Rutgers' divestment from Israel would be wrong. I believe strongly that enlightenment comes from involvement and that lasting progress and peace are the outcomes of diplomacy and discussion.

The students also asked that Rutgers sever its relationship with Tel Aviv University. We will not do that. Period. As one member of our faculty wrote to me, our Israeli colleagues at Tel Aviv University are the last people we should be boycotting. In fact, in a separate joint venture with TAU and Hebrew University, Rutgers will be cosponsoring the US-Israel Alzheimer's Disease Conference taking place in Tel Aviv this September. Our faculty members leading this project anticipate that the conference will lead to future exchange programs in neuroscience between Rutgers and Israel.

The Work Ahead of Us

As noted earlier, I called at the start of the spring semester for civil discourse. I am the first to acknowledge that there have been too many instances at Rutgers where members of our community have failed in this regard. Some of the statements that I have heard are disgraceful and have no place at a university. Statements or actions that violate our code of conduct have been and will be addressed as such. Collectively, the vitriol represents a gaping wound in the Rutgers community, a wound that has the power to infect and cause permanent damage. I still maintain, however, that the best way to address that injury is to do everything that we can to recommit to educating our community so that it comes to understand that there is a better way to discuss and debate contentious ideas.

If ever there was a time for dialogue and a focus on civil discourse, it is now. We are in a highly polarized time, a time when you cannot turn on the TV, look at your phone, or walk into the public square without being confronted by ideas that one might find objectionable and offensive. Part of what universities do is to help the members of our community navigate that reality in the hope that they become better, stronger, and more resilient citizens. We do that by teaching people to be curious, to listen, and to engage in civil discourse.

In the days that followed our peaceful end to the student protest, thousands of people wrote to the university to express their frustration or dismay. I acknowledge their perspective. I know that many of the decisions Rutgers made, based on our experience and professional judgment as educators, have been second-guessed.

What was clear before the encampment, and what has become clearer since, is that we have work to do at Rutgers. The healing will take time, and I am committed to it. Part of this work will require addressing gaps in our Jewish student, faculty, and staff experience, and Chancellor Conway has already started that work with the wisdom and insights of her Advisory Council on Antisemitism and Jewish Life. With the assistance of the Anti-Defamation League, we will develop trainings on recognizing and combating antisemitism. Because conversation brings enlightenment, we will also talk with our Jewish students to discuss, as we did with the protestors, their own pressing issues that deserve the university's attention.

We will also apply our policies regarding student conduct, disruptions, and harassment to those who protested last month. And we will look closely at whether any of the student organizations involved should face sanctions. The university will pursue disciplinary action against those who committed violations of our policies, as we already have done in other instances.

While I acknowledge the criticisms we have received, and once again recognize the mighty tasks that lie ahead to bring about healing, I am confident in the decisions we made in ending the protest at Rutgers peacefully. Those decisions kept our students and our entire community safe, and they ensured that our students could successfully complete their studies for the semester.

In closing, let me speak briefly to the Rutgers community. I have heard you over the last several months. I have felt your care for our students. I share your frustration at injustice in our world, your pain at senseless suffering, and your desire to make Rutgers a stronger community. And I thank you for your concern and your commitment. We cannot give in to the easy path of letting our differences become our divisions. The healing will take time, and through the efforts I mentioned, I am committed to it. We are committed to it.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.