



May 18, 2024

To Members of the Presidential Review Committee:

I write to ask that you **not** reappoint Bill Flanagan as President of the University of Alberta.

This letter contains new and important eyewitness information about the encampment clearance that casts the President's leadership in dismaying new light.

Summary:

- Bill Flanagan must not be reappointed President because of the damage he has done to the University's reputation and the needless violence and harm he instigated toward students, faculty and the wider community.
- Bill Flanagan never met with or engaged the protesters about their demands.
- The reasons offered by Flanagan and EPS for the violent police raid are false or distorted: I rebut them one by one below, based importantly on my own observations.

I have been a professor at UAlberta since 1997 and have served in many roles at all levels of the University. My greatest career passion, though, has been teaching. I have won two national teaching awards (3M and Alan Blizzard), held both the Vargo Chair and the McCalla Professorship, and have won more University teaching awards than I can count at this point.

I am Jewish and a member of Independent Jewish Voices (IJV), an organization of people for whom Jewish teachings demand a commitment to decolonization, solidarity with Palestinians, and racial justice. The past seven months have been a whirlwind for me as Israel has brutalized historic Palestine with intensity and ferocity not seen since the Nakba (the expulsion and killing of Palestinians when the state of Israel was violently established). I am not a lifelong activist, but I could not ignore this genocide being conducted with the complicity of the Canadian government, with the support of corporations supported by my pension and my university's investments, in the spurious name of Jewish safety. So I have become, I guess, an activist. This has mainly been through the broader Palestinian community and IJV. I wasn't in close contact with UAlberta and MacEwan student activists until they set up their one-day encampment on April 22.

The April 22 encampment drew me in. It was so sweet and inspiring and aligned with my own pedagogical experiments creating rich learning environments. These were young people as we all once were, figuring out a complex project together – getting the pieces in place; organizing; setting up; adjusting; sharing decision making; making art and signs; developing strategy under complex political circumstances. It all made for a beautiful, nerdy day on the Quad: singing, chanting, chatting, some folks in tents studying. It was porous to the community: a call went out for support and folks, many of them Indigenous or racialized, came to protest with the students. Entirely peaceful and charged with a passion for justice, it felt like the UAlberta I have always dreamed of and have tried to enable in my political science classrooms.

Learning and solidarity combined potently with the students never forgetting the cause for which they were there: an absolute commitment to Palestine and to ending the ongoing genocide. Older people can get jaded about injustice, treat it as complicated and unfathomable as we struggle with our everyday challenges. Younger people are less hardened: they see what's happening in Gaza beneath the propaganda and cannot sleep, cannot rest, are committed to struggle until the injustice ends. And many of the students are Palestinian and cannot rest because it is their relatives who are being slaughtered in Israeli bombings and attacks in Gaza and the West Bank.

Because of my involvement on April 22 in that one-day protest for disclosure and divestment of investments that support Israeli genocide, I was made aware of another encampment being set up on May 9. I showed up with another IJV member to help. I was in the encampment from its start to its coercive end, except for just a few hours each night when I went home to sleep. A dozen other IJV members from UAlberta and beyond were there, on and off, much of the time.

The President's official statements (as well as EPS statements) severely distort what the encampment was like. I will make the charitable assumption that the President is not deliberately lying to cover up an obscene mistake that harmed many people. We could charitably assume, instead, that he and his team are seeing the encampment through the lens of racist stereotypes and a 'security' mindset that treats police – and compliance with police – as the only reliable source of safety. They were thus unable to perceive the reliable and robust safety provided in the encampment by community, solidarity, and careful planning at the grassroots. The encampment was safe in the hands of its community and leaders until the President called in police to disperse it, bringing unnecessary violence down on members of the UAlberta community, our alumni, and Edmontonians.

The encampment from May 9-11 was very much like the one on April 22 that I described. Unlike many other student encampments, it was never barricaded: it was tents on grass, open to its surroundings. Students sprawled on tarpaulins making political art. Faculty and community members sat on camping chairs at the south end of the camp each day enjoying the sun, catching up, conversing with passersby, and talking as well to people who had questions about the camp or objections to it.

The President and EPS talk portentously of 'agitators' or 'outsiders' but the camp was in fact an inspiring weaving together of student leadership, faculty and staff support, alumni involvement, and an outpouring of joyful solidarity from the broader community. The camp Instagram ([University4palestine.yeg](https://www.instagram.com/University4palestine.yeg)) would share camp needs for tables or food or fire extinguishers or

tents, and folks would show up with these, often in much larger quantities than needed. If the President or his team had left their offices and come to the periphery of the camp they would have seen this buzzing, friendly collaboration. But instead, they believed and now propagate a twisted, paranoid version of what in fact went on.

Let me unpack some of the spurious and dangerous claims made by the President and EPS about the encampment:

Campers disobeyed orders to disperse

- This is technically true, but there is crucial context. Palestinian student organizers who should have felt cared for and supported by their University have instead been disavowed since October. Their requests to meet with the President have for months been unmet. There are many other relevant instances, which they can speak to themselves. As a result, and with good reason, they mistrust University officials. They do not want to engage with the University except around their core demands. In this light, I offered to be an intermediary between the camp and Frank Pagé (Manager, Threat Assessment Program and Investigations, University of Alberta Protective Services) who was the only face the University ever showed the students. (No official of the University, and nobody from the President's Office, ever came to the camp to offer to talk about any of the students' demands. The only University engagement with the camp was around 'safety' via campus security.)
- Pagé first showed up a couple of hours into the camp and asked me to talk. Representing the University, she expressed friendliness toward the camp but also worry. She offered, in this first meeting, to do anything needed to keep the campers safe. She offered to provide garbage cans, first aid supplies, a fire extinguisher, and if the students wished, to put fencing around the camp. She said with absolute clarity that the University would not seek to end the camp and would not call in EPS to clear the camp **unless there was violence**.
- I relayed this to the students. They were mistrustful of University Protective Services given past experiences and were putting much energy into supporting those at the encampment in keeping each other safe. They had detailed safety guidelines for the camp that anyone entering had to agree to. They had policies not to engage with counter-protesters (only once did a couple of counter-protesters appear and the policy was followed: they were allowed to do their thing, campers ignored them and turned on some music, and eventually they tired and went away). Even people known to be hostile to the camp wandered through taking pictures: they were watched but not obstructed. When I reported Pagé's offer of help, the students decided not to take the items offered: they preferred to provide for themselves. I told them I would bring a fire extinguisher from home the next day, which I did.
- Pagé returned to camp later during the first day carrying a fire extinguisher and a first aid kit. She also carried the first trespass notice instructing campers to leave Quad, invoking the Trespass Act and associated penalties. However, Pagé said (explicitly, unambiguously, and more than once in that conversation) that this changed nothing: that the University would only act against the camp if there were violence. **This is crucial: on the first day, students both received trespass notices and were told this was a formality and that their camp could remain.**
- This is vital context for all the trespass notices: on the first day, trespass notices were communicated as being a technical legal requirement for the University, congruent with the encampment being allowed to stay. Throughout the camp I also maintained informal contact

with senior administrators I know, and they communicated the same thing: that the University had decided, at the level of the Provost's team, to leave the encampment alone so long as it was non-violent.

Campers were collecting pallets that were a fire hazard or could have been used to fortify the camp

- On the morning of the second day of the camp, I again went out to meet Officer Pagé as she approached. She said that there were pallets piled at the north edge of the camp and these were a 'combustion hazard' and must be moved. She never mentioned concerns about barricading, which would have been absurd: there were five pallets as far as I know, which could not have barricaded even a single tent, much less the whole encampment. Nor did I ever hear talk by student leaders of barricading the camp.
- I communicated this concern to students, and they found it laughable. But later that day they decided that they might as well remove the pallets from camp. Campers carried them to a nearby dumpster.
- After the sweep, our President proclaimed that there were pallets within 150 meters of the camp. Perhaps this included pallets from other sources, since pallets (a commonplace object) are all over campus on any given day. Had *pallets from the camp* been a real worry, these were far from the camp by Friday evening (I believe beside a dumpster) and could have been taken away by maintenance anytime. In fact, a peer tells me that they **were** taken away by University maintenance that night, though I did not see this myself. So just to be clear: the 'dangerous' pallets were taken out of the camp at least nine hours before the raid by riot police: the raid took place long after they were safely out of the picture.

Campers possessed fire extinguishers to be used as weapons against police

- After Officer Pagé expressed concerns about the combustible pallets, students put out a call on Instagram for more fire extinguishers. Many were delivered by a broader Edmonton community aligned with their movement and aims. The camp ended up with quite a few. But the presence of fire extinguishers on site, far from being a sign of 'escalation', was a responsible reaction to fire concerns conveyed to the camp by the University of Alberta itself.
- In all the conversations with Officer Pagé, the sole University official in contact with the camp, concerns were **never** expressed about the presence of fire extinguishers. Recall that Officer Pagé herself offered a fire extinguisher at the beginning of the encampment.
- [Concerns about fire extinguishers were revealed by EPS in their May 18 Media Availability rather than by Flanagan directly, but I assume were part of his deliberation and decision.]

Campers had hammers, screwdrivers, and other tools that could have been used as weapons

- This is slanderous and absurd. One of the toolkits was mine. We were setting up a campsite and banners: tools were useful. They were stored in tool bags in tents. If possessing these tools is a sign of danger that justifies a police response, please think about how the University will function after every maintenance person, every lab, every fine arts studio (and every staff member who's the least bit resourceful around the office) is chased off campus by police with truncheons and non-lethal weapons.

Only 25% of the campers were UAlberta students

- Was this meant to offer a reason for police intervention, or to show that the police violence was not so bad? The University has no way of knowing how many of the encampment participants were UAlberta students, or staff, or faculty. Some of the student leaders were from Macewan. Many of the participants were alumni. Some were members of our broader community. These were strengths of the camp, and forms of connection that the University typically cherishes, celebrates, and leverages for fundraising. The intermingling of these groups in the camp was not a justification to violently sweep it, nor does it lessen the harm done.

Members of the camp were preparing to refuse to follow police orders

- Campers intended to stay peacefully on UAlberta Quad until their demands were met. Again, no official of the University ever offered to discuss student demands with the encampment leaders. Ever.

Student demands:

1. **Disclose** institutional and financial investments with Israeli institutions and all companies financially complicit in the occupation and the genocide of Palestinians.
2. **Divest** from complicit companies and all such investments.
3. **Defend** the right to protest by giving amnesty to all participants in the encampment.
4. **Declare** condemnation of this genocide and call on the Canadian government to end all military contracts with Israel.

- Because police action was always a possibility, student leaders – responsibly – worked hard to make sure camp participants could sustain their peaceful protest while reducing safety risk. They were keeping each other safe. They invited campers to think about what they would do if police arrived: did they want to leave immediately (this was advised, for example, for people with precarious immigration status that could be compromised if their peaceful resistance led to arrest). Did they want to support others but at some distance from police? Or did they want to peacefully sit down or link arms in front of the police and refuse to leave?
- EPS, in its May 17 Media Availability, treated this preparation as itself being a form of escalation that justified violent intervention. But first of all, EPS would not have intervened if not asked to do so by President Flanagan, so this is on him. Second, minor lawbreaking (e.g. trespassing) and peaceful refusal to disperse are staples of every major social justice movement. If you celebrate the campaign for universal suffrage, or movements for Black civil rights, or Indigenous movements, or movements that improved rights for queer folks, you are celebrating people who trespassed and refused orders to disperse. Moreover, [legal experts](#) have been speaking in droves since the encampment to insist that Charter jurisprudence protects political speech and action that involves law-breaking, making the constitutional bar for dispersing University encampments higher than simple trespass.
- In all the conversations with Officer Pagé (the sole University representative liaising with the camp) questions/concerns were **never** expressed about these preparations.

The outrage is not only that the President called in the police based on overwrought and inaccurate characterizations of the elements above. It's that not the slightest attempt was made by the University to communicate with the camp about these various concerns (except the pallets, and the camp was responsive to concerns, addressing fire risks and later moving the pallets).

Indeed, starting with the third trespass notice (and recall that the camp had earlier been told that trespass notices need not be taken at face value), Officer Pagé refused to talk further with me or a second faculty member serving as intermediaries. We directly asked whether there were safety concerns that could be addressed: she refused to converse beyond handing over a trespass notices.

So let me get back to the reappointment process. If the President is telling the truth that police were brought in to sweep the camp because of dire fears about security and escalation, he is not a responsible decision maker. He did not gather robust information to support his decision. He did not insist that communication be kept open so specific safety risks could be resolved. He did not put sufficient effort into de-escalation and problem solving. He did not take the basic and obvious step of meeting with protesters about their demands.

More damningly, to me, he was wrapped up in a managerial, risk-assessment mindset, unable to see all that was positive in the encampment as part of a great university wishing to educate its members in practices of citizenship. These were our students engaging in rich community with faculty, staff, alumni, and Edmontonians around a pressing issue of social justice. The camp was manifesting many beautiful things – students learning political skills from each other and movement elders; profound interfaith connections being built, including through a Shabbat service in the camp; and so much more. The President, who never came to the camp, perceived none of this.

He also showed no awareness of the danger he brought onto campus by calling in EPS. I was in the camp when the sweep happened. Those pushed back by the police bled. They were bruised. And many are genuinely traumatized. I've been watching a lot of community care for people, and the harm is real and deep. But frankly, though the harm done is severe, it could easily have been **much** worse. It was only the savvy of a couple of experienced community members that prevented more serious injuries as the campers were pushed back by tens of armed police, over many obstacles and rough ground, at first in dim light, across the campus.

I am sure you appreciate the acute reputational damage our University is suffering because of President Flanagan's choices and subsequent communications. The reasons the President has offered for bringing in police have made us a laughingstock. The President's choice to call police to sweep a peaceful student encampment has profoundly outraged and alienated faculty, staff, students, and community members.

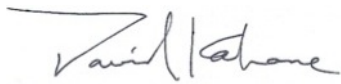
Please do not reappoint President Flanagan. He is not fit to serve. Instead, please choose a President who can be a skilled leader in the face of reasonable demands that the University end its complicity in Israeli genocide: this means disclosing investments, divesting from corporations

that support ongoing atrocities, and declaring support (as the University did with Ukraine) for a people under violent occupation.

Lastly, I implore you to recognize the intensity of the outrage of the Palestinian community, the Muslim community, parts of the Jewish community, and many parts of the University community. It will endure and grow until the University admits serious mistakes and meets student demands.

This is not going away. Please select a new President able to be accountable and to move us forward together.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Kahane". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "D".

Professor David Kahane