

The Columbia University Report on Its Middle Eastern Department's Problems: A Methodological Paradigm for Obscuring Structural Flaws

Noah Liben

- *Over a number of years, significant structural problems had developed in Columbia University's Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department (MEALAC). These concerned biased teaching, intimidation of pro-Israeli students, and inadequate grievance procedures.*
- *Dozens of cases of faculty misbehavior were finally exposed in the documentary *Columbia Unbecoming*, which was released in October 2004 by the David Project. This led to the appointment by the administration of an ad hoc faculty committee. None of the five members was unconnected to the matter they had to judge objectively. The issue of biased teaching was a priori excluded from their investigation.*
- *The committee's report focused on the one point where Columbia's administration had admitted its fault: handling student grievances. On the intimidation issue, only three cases were seemingly investigated of which one was dismissed. The faculty member found to be at fault, Professor Joseph Massad, was not punished. The report, immediately accepted by the administration, was only partially published.*
- *The behavior of Columbia's administration continues to raise many questions as to universities' capability - and Columbia's in particular - to reform themselves.*

Columbia University's Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department (MEALAC) offers courses on the literature, culture, history, and languages of the area that extends from North Africa to the Himalayas and into the Indian Subcontinent. The department consists of twenty full-time faculty members; of those, two teach Hebrew literature and one, Hebrew language. In contrast, there are four professors of Arabic language, two of Arabic literature, and one of Arab politics.¹

Over the past months, much publicity has been given to significant structural problems that had developed in MEALAC over the years. On 28 March 2005, the university's administration released a report² dealing with some, rather than all aspects of these issues.

The recurrent problems that had come into the open mainly concerned three matters:

1. The one-sided teaching in MEALAC. A simple indicator of this bias is that 78 percent of the department's faculty signed the anti-Israeli divestment petition, whereas in the university as a whole only a few percent did so.³
2. The intimidation of pro-Israeli students in MEALAC. Dozens of cases were exposed in the documentary *Columbia Unbecoming*,⁴ which was released in October 2004. The film was produced by Columbia students with the assistance of the David Project, a Boston-based grassroots organization dedicated to a fair and honest portrayal of the Middle East conflict.
3. The inadequacy of the university's grievance procedures. Students with complaints about MEALAC professors had tried, over at least a three-year period, to register formal grievances. After first raising

their concerns with the teachers themselves, students then tried to convince deans and department chairs, and even higher levels of the administration, to intervene. All these efforts were in vain. Many examples of the administration's inadequate responses are also related in the documentary.⁵

One may wonder how it was possible that frequently recurring discriminatory events at a prestigious university over a number of years had finally to be revealed by a student video. The answer is that an institution, which proclaims that progress in knowledge is best fostered by academic freedom, had developed substantial skills in hiding unpleasant facts.

Minimizing Damage

Once the matter was in the open the university administration apparently decided, probably partly consciously and partly subconsciously, to engage in damage control rather than solve the problems. Its attitude toward the challenge thus reflected its own deficiencies.

First, the administration created an ad hoc faculty committee comprising five professors from the School of Arts and Sciences. It was charged with looking "into the set of issues and complaints that gave rise to the current controversy,"⁶ though none of its members was unconnected to the matter they had to judge objectively. Of the five, two had signed the anti-Israeli divestment petition; one was the dissertation adviser for Joseph Massad, the professor most often accused of student abuse; one wrote in the *Financial Times* that America went to war in [Iraq](#) for the benefit of Israel and that Israel is responsible for global anti-Semitism;⁷ and one was a university administrator who ignored student complaints for months. The man who handpicked the committee, current Vice-President for Arts and Sciences Nicholas Dirks, is married to a professor, Janaki Bakhle, who co-teaches a class with Massad. Both Dirks and Bakhle signed the original divestment petition, although Dirks's name is absent from the most recently updated list.⁸

The choice, out of the entire Columbia faculty, of five members who are personal friends and close colleagues of the accused professors, represented a further intimidation tactic. As students with complaints against MEALAC professors wrote to President Bollinger in December 2004, "Students fear that speaking to the committee will have real repercussions on their academic and professional advancement....No assurances of professionalism can convince them that this is a safe environment to come out to."⁹

Furthermore, the mandate given to the committee was not to address all three related problems mentioned above, but only the issues of intimidation and grievance procedures. According to Dirks, "The committee is specifically not being asked to investigate political or scholarly opinions, curriculum, or departments."¹⁰ Instead, its focus was to be "the character of interactions between faculty and students occurring within the classroom and the broader pedagogical environment."¹¹ Thus, the accusation raised by students in *Columbia Unbecoming* - that lies and propaganda were being promulgated in the framework of teaching in MEALAC - was a priori excluded from the committee's investigation.

Finding What Was Sought

The committee's findings were another part of the process of obscuring the truth. The report focused on the one point where Columbia's administration had admitted its fault: handling student grievances. Months before the committee first convened, Provost Alan Brinkley had already acknowledged the "inadequacy of our grievance procedures."¹²

Moreover, the report minimized the number of cases of intimidation investigated, though *Columbia Unbecoming* had mentioned dozens. Despite hearing testimony of tens of instances of professorial misconduct, the committee focused only on the three that had received the most media attention. It was "particularly concerned" with these three incidents because "they challenge in varying degrees our collegium's widespread normative expectations concerning a civil and tolerant learning environment."¹³

Since not much was investigated, little could be found. In one case, Professor Massad allegedly ordered a student to leave his classroom if she persisted in "denying Israeli atrocities done to the Palestinians."

The second incident again involved Massad, this time at an extracurricular, off-campus lecture where he reportedly refused to take a question from an Israeli student, instead retorting: "How many Palestinians have you killed?" The third instance on which the committee reported involved Professor George Saliba, who allegedly told a Jewish student that she had no claim to the Land of Israel because she has "green eyes" and is therefore "not a Semite."

In addition, the report only admitted that Professor Massad was at fault in cases where this conclusion was almost unavoidable. Regarding Massad's refusal to permit a student to "deny Israeli atrocities," the committee found "it credible that [he] became angered" at her question, and that "his rhetorical response to her query exceeded commonly accepted bounds by conveying that her question merited harsh public criticism."¹⁴ Nevertheless, no disciplinary measures were proposed.

Similarly, the committee interpreted the evidence against Professor Saliba in a way that any objective observer would have found impossible to defend. Concerning his intimidating remark about a student's eye color, the report found "it credible that this conversation did occur and that a reference to eye color was made near its conclusion...However regrettable a personal reference might have been, it is a good deal more likely to have been a statement that was integral to an argument about the uses of history and lineage than an act approaching intimidation."¹⁵ Again, the committee refrained from reprimanding the professor; its members must have considered Saliba's correlation between green eyes and lack of Semitic origin to be a scientific argument.

Furthermore, continuing to obfuscate matters, the report "found no evidence of any statements made by the faculty that could reasonably be construed as anti-semitic."¹⁶ This, however, is irrelevant, since none of the students had accused the professors of anti-Semitism in the classrooms. Ariel Beery, leader of the group Columbians for Academic Freedom, called this finding "deeply insulting," since complaints were about intimidation, not racism.¹⁷ Harvard Professor Alan Dershowitz noted: "The charge was that there was an atmosphere of intimidation toward pro-Israel students. To respond by saying there is no anti-Semitism is to erect and destroy a straw man."¹⁸

Turning the Tables

Lastly, the faculty committee tried to turn the tables on those who had finally brought MEALAC's many flaws into the open by accusing those people more severely than those professors who had abused their position. Referring to pro-Israeli students who dared to challenge anti-Israeli lies and inaccuracies, the report stated, "Their frequent interruptions and hostile asides disturbed many of the students [in the classes]." The committee further mentioned that Massad's teaching style allowed a "small but vociferous group of...students to disrupt lectures by their incessant questions and comments."¹⁹ The document, however, does not cite specific examples of these alleged "interruptions," nor provide evidence that anyone ever complained about the "disruptions."

Along those lines, the report found it "deeply disturbing" that an unnamed pro-Israeli instructor was "apparently prepared to encourage students to report to (him) on a fellow-professor's classroom statements." Likewise, the committee blamed outside organizations, including Campus Watch, for contributing to an atmosphere of intimidation in which Arabist professors felt spied upon. Thus, the main problem allegedly lay not with anti-Israeli professors daunting Jewish students, but with "vociferous" pro-Israeli students, faculty, and outside groups creating an uncivil environment.

The report thus created the infrastructure for the next step in the process of obscuring the facts up the chain of command. The highest levels of the university's administration accepted the report immediately. Dirks, who handpicked the committee, gave praise for "an extraordinarily helpful document" and commended its authors for serving "the principle of faculty self governance with distinction."²⁰ Provost Brinkley "accept[ed] the findings and recommendations of the committee."²¹ President Bollinger stated, "This is a very thoughtful and comprehensive review that deserves our full attention."²²

Did Damage Control Work?

Once the report was published, the question emerged: did damage control work? Judging by the early returns, the answer is that the administration's policy of obfuscation seemed to succeed to a limited extent, and most likely far less than they had hoped for.

At Columbia both sides were dissatisfied with the report, which was the most negative outcome possible. Deena Shanker, the student whom Massad shouted down and told to leave the classroom if she continued to "deny Israeli atrocities," said the document was "neither surprising nor satisfactory."²³ Freshman Alexandra Polsky said, "It's a whitewash and it's offensive,"²⁴ and Ariel Beery called it "the second strike against Columbia when it comes to students' rights."²⁵

On the other side of the debate, the cover-up emboldened the followers of Massad and the other accused professors to attack whatever little had been uncovered. Issa Mikel, a student who defends the academics, criticized the report for being "deceptively disastrous."²⁶ A meeting in support of the professors was held on 4 April 2005, under the umbrella of "Stop McCarthyism at Columbia" - a classic reaction of university radicals wishing to silence opponents by calling them names rather than by arguing facts. Speakers at the event condemned the Jewish students' efforts to foster free discourse and eliminate intimidation from the classrooms, calling their campaign a "right-wing onslaught" led by a "small number of Zionist students."²⁷

Some of the media covering the story, including *CNN.com*²⁸ and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*,²⁹ summarized the report without much comment. Others, such as the *New York Sun*,³⁰ the *New York Post*,³¹ and the *American Thinker*,³² were critical of the document. Similarly, a *New York Daily News* article opened with the sentence, "The stacked deck produced a whitewash."³³ Even a *New York Times* editorial commented that the report was "deeply unsatisfactory because the panel's mandate was so limited."³⁴

Of the major Jewish organizations that responded to the controversy, only the American Jewish Committee seemed satisfied with the report, calling it "an important step forward" and praising the committee for reaffirming the principles of academic freedom.³⁵ In contrast, the David Project considered the document "disgraceful, beyond our expectation."³⁶ The American Jewish Congress found fault with the biased composition of the committee members, and stated, "Teachers do not have the right to turn their classrooms or their departments into soapboxes for their pet causes."³⁷ Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, asserted, "It's a sad day at Columbia University. The report by the Ad Hoc Grievance Committee protects the faculty, gives little credibility to the students, and comes up with no solutions at all to deal with the concerns about intimidation."³⁸ For the New York Board of Rabbis, the Columbia ploy failed completely: "Who would have thought that Columbia would make the U.N. look good?" quipped Joseph Potasnik, their executive vice-president.³⁹ Professor Dershowitz remarked, "The conclusions lack credibility because of the terrible mistake that a good man, Lee Bollinger, made in selecting the committee."⁴⁰

Conclusion

Columbia University is a paradigm for a large, prestigious institution that ignored deep-rooted problems and then tried to save face rather than correcting them. After disregarding MEALAC's structural flaws for as long as it could, as well as the inadequacies of the school's grievance procedures, Columbia adopted a policy of obscuring the issues instead of addressing them. First, the administration appointed a biased faculty committee, compromised by personal and professional relationships with the accused professors, then instructed it to deal only with some of the problems. Next, even within the purview of what it was supposed to investigate, the committee focused on only a fraction of the complaints. Furthermore, it continued to obfuscate matters by absolving the professors of something they were never charged with. Lastly, the committee turned the tables on the students by blaming the victims rather than the perpetrators. Thereafter, only part of the report was published by the administration.

Because it obfuscates more than it clarifies, the Columbia report raises much larger questions than it

answers. Some that come to mind are: if a major university's administration is so unwilling to confront obvious, ongoing problems, what other structural issues are being concealed and how many other departments are affected? If, after so many years, Columbia refuses to come clean, is more permanent outside intervention in the school's affairs the sole solution? One question posed by the *New York Sun*⁴¹ is, what is the responsibility of the university trustees?

In the aftermath of the faculty committee's report, the message coming through is that many professors with an ax to grind can continue to do so with impunity at the expense of the truth and their students' knowledge. The problems raised are not specific to Columbia. Many more examples of flawed Middle East and other departments are known throughout the United States,⁴² as are cases of intimidation of students, and not necessarily only Jewish ones. It seems that all the Columbia administration has achieved with its report is an unsatisfactory response to the first of more such campus battles to come.

* * *

Notes

1. See <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/mealac/faculty/>.
2. A transcript of the Ad Hoc Grievance Committee report can be read at: http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/05/03/ad_hoc_grievance_committee_report.html.
3. See http://www.columbiadivest.org/sig_list.html.
4. For a transcript of *Columbia Unbecoming*, see: <http://www.columbiaunbecoming.com/script.htm>.
5. Ibid.
6. "Ad Hoc Grievance Committee Guidelines to Procedure," http://www.columbia.edu/cu/vpas/adhocgrievancecommittee/guidelines_to_procedure.html.
7. Lisa Hirschmann, "Committee Draws Fire, Keeps Investigating MEALAC," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 27 January 2005.
8. For two complete lists, see "Background and Analysis," <http://www.campus-watch.org/article/id/1638>, Appendix A.
9. See *Columbia Unbecoming* transcript.
10. "Charge to Ad Hoc Committee from the Vice President for Arts and Sciences," http://www.columbia.edu/cu/vpas/adhocgrievancecommittee/charge_to_adhogrievancecommittee.html.
11. "Ad Hoc Grievance Committee Guidelines."
12. Provost Alan Brinkley, Letter to President Lee Bollinger, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/provost/docs/abletter_bollinger.html, 6 December 2004.
13. Ad Hoc Grievance Committee report.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Quoted in David Andreatta, "Columbia Jews Want Outside Probe," *New York Post*, 1 April 2005.
18. Quoted in Jacob Gershman, "Bollinger Criticized for Embracing Report Clearing Faculty," *New York Sun*, 1 April 2005.
19. Ad Hoc Grievance Committee report.
20. Nicholas Dirks, Letter to President Bollinger and Provost Brinkley, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/05/03/response_to_report.html, 31 March 2005.
21. Provost Alan Brinkley, Letter to President Bollinger, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/05/03/response_to_report.html, 31 March 2005.
22. President Lee Bollinger, Letter to the Columbia Community, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/news/05/03/response_to_report.html, 31 March 2005.
23. Quoted in Lisa Hirshmann, "Students Respond to Ad Hoc Report," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, 1 April 2005.
24. Quoted in Andreatta, "Columbia Jews."

25. Ibid.
26. Quoted in Hirshmann, "Students Respond."
27. Quoted in Jacob Gershman, "Faculty Denounce 'Right-Wing Attack,'" *New York Sun*, 5 April 2005.
28. "Columbia Professors Cleared of Large-Scale Intimidation," *CNN.com*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2005/EDUCATION/03/31/columbia.intimidation.ap/index.html>, 31 March 2005.
29. Jennifer Jacobsen, "Columbia U. Report Criticizes Professor's Classroom Conduct but Finds No Pattern of Anti-Semitism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 April 2005.
30. Staff Editorial, "Where Are the Trustees?" *New York Sun*, 1 April 2005.
31. Staff Editorial, "Columbia's Coverup," *New York Post*, 5 April 2005.
32. Richard Baehr, "Columbia Whitewash," *American Thinker*, 1 April 2005.
33. Richard Schwartz, "Columbia's Blind Spot," *New York Daily News*, 3 April 2005.
34. Staff Editorial, "Intimidation at Columbia," *New York Times*, 7 April 2005.
35. American Jewish Committee, "AJC Praises Columbia University," <http://ajc.org/InTheMedia/PressReleases.asp?did=1559>, March 31, 2005.
36. Charles Jacobs, "David Project Responds to Columbia Report on Student Harassment; 'Biased Committee Ignores Facts, Protects Its Own,'" <http://releases.usnewswire.com/GetRelease.asp?id=45143>, 31 March 2005.
37. American Jewish Congress press release, "Congress Issues Statement on Columbia University's Committee Findings on Campus Anti-Semitism and Harassment," <http://www.prnewswire.com/cgi-bin/stories.pl?ACCT=109&STORY=/www/story/03-31-2005/0003295284&EDATE>, 31 March 2005.
38. Abraham Foxman, "Report on Student Intimidation at Columbia Inadequate; Findings on Anti-Semitism a 'Red Herring,'" http://www.adl.org/PresRele/DiRaB_41/46776_41.htm, 31 March 2005.
39. Staff Editorial, "Where Are the Trustees?" *New York Sun*, 1 April 2005.
40. Quoted in Javier C. Hernandez, "Columbia Clears Department of Anti-Semitism Charge," *Harvard Crimson*, 5 April 2005.
41. Staff Editorial, "Where Are the Trustees?" *New York Sun*.
42. See Martin Kramer, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle East Studies in America* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001); Manfred Gerstenfeld, "The Anti-Israeli Bias of Middle Eastern Studies at American Universities: An Interview with Martin Kramer," [Jerusalem](http://www.jerusalemcenter.org) Center for Public Affairs, Jerusalem, 2005.

* * *

Noah Liben is a recent graduate of Columbia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary, and a former president of LionPAC, Columbia's pro-Israeli political action group. He has conducted research at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, where this article was written during a 2005 internship.