

May 21, 2025

Claire Shipman
Acting President, Columbia University
202 Low Library
535 W 116th Street, MC 4309
New York, NY 10027
Sent Via Certified Mail and Email

Laura Ann Rosenbury
President, Barnard College
3009 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
Sent Via Certified Mail and Email

Dear Presidents Shipman and Rosenbury:

We, the undersigned nineteen national and New York City organizations that advocate for student journalists, press freedom and the preservation of democratic institutions and civic engagement, write to you to express profound concern regarding the appalling treatment this month of student journalists from your respective schools during events at Butler Library, and the alarming disciplinary actions that followed.

What transpired on May 7 was not merely a campus disturbance but a continuation of the perilous erosion of press freedoms, procedural justice and institutional accountability plainly sought by your student journalists. The *Columbia Daily Spectator's* [rigorously-documented account](#) (“Columbia and Barnard are failing their student press”) presents a harrowing story of WKCR and *Spectator* student journalists who, in the execution of their vital roles, were physically harmed, silenced, obstructed and later threatened and penalized for doing the work your institutions trained them to do: cover the news.

Columbia University, in particular, is an institution to whom the journalism community has long looked for leadership. From its legendary and world-renowned Columbia Journalism School; to Columbia's role in awarding the Pulitzer Prizes, journalism's top honor; to publishing the influential *Columbia Journalism Review*; to its ties to the Columbia Scholastic Press Association, which for over 100 years has brought thousands of student journalists and journalism educators to its campus from around the country to teach them what journalists do and how to do it well, Columbia has long been a hallowed space for journalists. That reputation has been seriously tested by several recent events, now including the May 7 attacks on student reporters. By many accounts, you are failing [“abysmally.”](#) Know that damage done to your student journalism ecosystem is damage to us all.

We must confront an uncomfortable truth: Columbia and Barnard have treated members of the student press not as essential chroniclers of campus life and seekers of truth, but as adversaries.

To physically restrain a student holding a press badge, to choke and bruise her while she clearly identified herself as a member of student media, constitutes not only a violation of her rights as your student, and as a journalist, but an assault on the foundational principles of the broader community that is academia. That other student reporters were kettled, denied access or physically shoved indiscriminately by law enforcement despite press identification only compounds this disgrace.

While “hot” news scenes always carry some risk to reporters, even more insidious here is the intentional disciplinary retribution that followed. Interim suspensions, especially those levied without due process or evidence of rule-breaking, signal a dangerous weaponization of university policy to chill speech and intimidate those who observe and report. Their timing around an obviously critical juncture in the academic year — final exams — demonstrates a callous disregard for the entire body of work your students strove to accomplish for months, all very nearly dashed in a matter of hours. Ironically, the student punished for covering the protest in Butler Library was — prior to the protest — writing an essay on the First Amendment.

Allow us to be clear: A free student press is not a luxury, but a necessity, especially during such moments of institutional crisis. [Your own students have articulated this beautifully](#), and for that, you should be proud of them. Let that pride extend to heeding their requests in an effort to protect their work rather than punish it. We join them in urging your administrations to immediately take the following actions:

1. **Publicly acknowledge** the harm caused to student journalists by Public Safety and the New York Police Department during the May 7 protest to dignify the individuals who experienced the well-documented and amply-witnessed melee;
2. **Apologize** to all student journalists issued suspensions, temporary or otherwise, for unjust punitive measures, and commit to full transparency and an unequivocal promise to not repeat such disciplinary overreach in the future; and
3. **Engage directly and publicly** with student media, as they have explicitly and reasonably requested now multiple times.

To their justified demands, we would further add:

4. **Cease** any investigations against student journalists for covering the May 7 or earlier protests on campus;
5. **Expunge** any and all student disciplinary record references to the protests for the student journalists; and
6. **Guarantee protections** for student journalists, including by better training your Public Safety officers to understand the role of student journalists and by creating clear protocols

that give full appropriate credence to campus press passes when presented, especially in light of the relevant [New York State law](#).

The greatest universities are not measured by the order they impose but the inquiry they allow. We urge you to take this opportunity to reprioritize inquiry without fear of retaliation. As organizations dedicated to the vital work of journalism, we collectively ask you: Please, do better.

Signed,

Student Press Law Center
Associated Collegiate Press
Association of Foreign Press Correspondents
Association of Health Care Journalists
College Media Association
Courage Foundation
The Deadline Club
Defending Rights & Dissent
Foreign Press Association
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression
Free Press
Freedom of the Press Foundation
Journalism Education Association
National Press Photographers Association
National Scholastic Press Association
PEN America
Quill and Scroll
Radio Television Digital News Association
Society of Professional Journalists