

# EXPRESSION, COMMUNICATION, AND GOVERNANCE:

## Findings from focus groups about life in student residence halls, Spring 2024

Prepared by the Barnard College Task Force on Campus Climate and Expression<sup>1</sup>

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<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Findings</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Looking Ahead</b>	<b>8</b>

### Introduction

Between April 8 and April 15, 2024, the Task Force on Campus Climate and Expression conducted a series of student focus groups that sought to gain insight into student experiences communicating with each other in the residence halls during several flashpoints in the academic year. Questions were designed to help members of the task force learn more about students' relationships to their residence halls both before and after October 7, their perspectives on the College's decision to revive its ban on door decorations, and the College's efforts to address safety, expression, and community. Rather than attempt to offer a comprehensive account of all student opinions at Barnard (which will be necessarily vast and varied), this reports seeks to identify the major themes, as well as points of significant divergence in student experience, that emerged in the focus groups and to recommend steps the College can take to meaningfully respond to the challenges that participating students raised.

Letters inviting students to participate in 30-45 minute focus groups were sent to all residential students (2,310 students), and three focus groups occurred. Five students participated in the first focus group, and eight students participated in the second. In order to appeal to students who might feel reluctant to offer their views in a mixed setting, Jennifer Rosales decided to conduct additional focus groups in affinity-based locations. One of these was advertised to take place in Columbia's Earl Hall, which houses Columbia Muslim Life and multiple Muslim student organizations, and another in the Columbia/Barnard Hillel, which describes itself as an organization that is dedicated to supporting students as they "explore and consciously define their Jewish identity." The focus group scheduled for Earl Hall was canceled after students who

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<sup>1</sup> The Task Force on Campus Climate and Expression was convened by Jennifer Rosales (former VP of Inclusion and Engaged Learning and the College's Chief Diversity Officer) for the duration of the 2023-2024 academic year. It consisted of students, faculty, staff at Barnard and was deliberately composed to bring together individuals who work in different parts of the College and hold a range of identities and viewpoints.

had signed up did not appear. Three students attended the Hillel group and finished the meeting.<sup>2</sup>

The facilitators of the focus groups were staff employed in the Inclusion and Engaged Learning division. Transcripts were analyzed by student, staff, and faculty representatives from the task force, who looked for both recurring themes and notable differences in student narratives. In retrospect, had we had time to conduct a more thorough study, we would have formulated questions that avoided the language of “safety” and “political expression” that echoed the administration’s communications and may have narrowed students’ responses to the larger issues that interested us. With this very brief study, we begin to understand the breadth of terms that students use to narrate their experiences. We have sought to avoid reifying concepts of “safety,” “political expression,” and others as ways of understanding these complex issues. Instead we emphasize the ways that students sometimes use but also contest and challenge the meanings and relevance of these terms.

We believe it is essential to understand the experiences not only of students but also of Office of Residential Life (non-student) staff in their attempts to cultivate student experience and enforce rules. To that end, Joanne Delgadillo, the Chief of Staff for the Office of DEI, interviewed three full-time staff about the issues we addressed in student focus groups.<sup>3</sup> Their responses confirmed that their views should be considered seriously when devising and implementing policy, and we discuss this further in our recommendations below.

Before sharing the findings from the focus groups and our recommendations, it is necessary to comment on the context in which we are writing this report and how it has informed our approach. At various points, we debated whether new events—such as the encampment on Columbia’s campus, Barnard’s suspensions and disciplinary hearings, and the heightened presence and practice of security on both campuses—had rendered the question of the door decoration policy obsolete. But as a task force, we decided our analysis and recommendations remained important for two primary reasons. First, we decided to produce this in the interest of supporting our colleagues in Residential Life, especially those who will be tasked with carrying

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout this document, we identify the dates of the focus groups when quoting directly from the transcript. Often, quotes from students who participated in the Hillel focus group are identified as such. This is in keeping with the convention of identifying relevant characteristics (but not precise identities) of focus group participants. We also feel that this affinity-based focus group generated responses to the questions at hand that were not replicated in the other focus groups, whose participants held a mix of ideological positions and social identities. Because the authors of this report did not conduct any of the focus groups, we do not know anything about the participants in the other two meetings other than the fact that they are students who lived in dormitories and have been at Barnard for different amounts of time. Quotes have been compressed using ellipses and lightly edited for the purposes of readability.

<sup>3</sup> We hesitate to draw broad conclusions from these three interviews, but the responses are informative: Staff members echoed students’ observations that the door decoration policy had largely failed on a practical level (i.e. students eventually posted more, not less). They appreciated that the blanket nature of the policy protected them from making judgment calls and thought that they implemented the policy fairly, but they blamed the practical failure on the lack of any punishment associated with infractions. Staff members also criticized the immense amount of work this policy created for them (some mentioned three hours a day.) Like students, staff strongly suggested that they be consulted before policies are implemented.

out this policy as long as it remains in effect. Second, we decided to produce this because the policy's implementation and reception in many ways prefigures the challenges and crises that wrack the college today and will continue to do so in the future. In this regard, our report aims to open a window into the practical and cultural implications of the college's decision-making processes and recommend steps that help Barnard rise to the challenges it faces. The value of this report resides in the variety of perspectives it reveals.

## Findings

Our analysis of the student focus groups turned up four consistent areas of concern. These include: (1) that students who were opposed to the door decoration policy and those who supported it initially described the policy as the college's attempt to suppress expressions of support for Palestine, even if technically the policy has been viewpoint neutral; (2) that regardless of students' positions on the policy itself, they do not always draw clear lines about the principles determining what should and should not be acceptable expression in residence halls, but they are broadly united in seeing dialogue and engagement as preferable to censorship; (3) that the ban on door decorations has had a negative impact on what they understand as Barnard's mission and culture; and (4) that students who opposed and supported the policy at its inception see it as having failed at a pragmatic level. The paragraphs below take up each of these points in turn.

Across all of the focus groups, **students described the college's door policy as an attempt to stifle expressions of support related to Palestine specifically. No one seemed to believe that the policy was, in fact, intended to be viewpoint neutral, despite the administration's statements to the contrary.** A participant in one of the earliest focus groups explicitly questioned the senior leadership's explanation that the policy was "viewpoint neutral," observing, "it's very clear, you know, whose complaints resulted in this policy and ... who exactly this policy is supposed to be targeting. I don't think any of us have any doubts [about] what exactly is not supposed to be on your doors" (April 9). A student from the Columbia/Barnard Hillel focus group agreed: "from what I've seen on campus, like, anything that's done, it's gonna be ... pro-Palestinian voices being silenced," while others from that group said, "we [Jewish students] knew that the [dorm door] policy was aimed at keeping us comfortable" (April 15). Students, then, agreed that the policy was resurrected to limit expression of a certain view.

Where students diverged was on the question of whether the College was justified in creating policy meant to limit just speech from supporters of one side of the Palestine-Israel conflict. Some students, who were upset by pro-Palestinian and anti-Zionist symbols, said that they appreciated the policy because they understood that it was meant to protect them: as one student from the Hillel focus group put it, "I think that if there are radical things happening, there have to be radical policies in place." Another student in the same group reported that she had felt overwhelmed by stickers in a residence hall bathroom carrying slogans like "Free Palestine" and "Long live the intifada." She explained, "Like, this is ... my home[.] I ... shouldn't, like, be avoiding a bathroom ...—this is where I live" (April 15). Later in the report, we discuss how these students came to see this as policy ineffective, even if they supported it at first.

Many students in the other focus groups, however, opposed the policy from the beginning. They acknowledged that their peers would feel “discomfort,” but thought that the College was treating the discomfort for these students as a safety issue—something to be regulated—when it would not do the same for other students feeling discomfort or even danger for other reasons. One student said:

It just feels like it's been a double standard ... [There] have been ... a lot of instances ... of actual ... unsafety—like physical violence ... towards other people where the college has done nothing[.] [But] when it comes to seeing a sticker on the door, and ‘Oh, that makes me uncomfortable,’ then they banned the whole thing. And it just feels like, Okay, but why...? *Why do we have to prioritize [comfort] for a smaller group of people, but not prioritize physical safety of another group, when the school can do both? I think the school can perfectly do both.* And [it] has not been doing both, which is my biggest concern” (emphasis added, April 8).

Many students made similar comments objecting to the College’s willingness to selectively protect some students but not others. This student in particular poses the question to the group, “Why?” and insists that the College can do better than to “prioritize” one group’s safety over another, that it can and should protect all groups of students equally. Coming from a different angle on the question of who and what counts under the rubric of “safety” being used, several students cast a critical eye on the effects of the decision to ban door decorations. One observed that the policy has brought overwhelming attention to debates over what constitutes permissible or impermissible “expression,” but that this focus draws attention away from other material threats that students have faced on campus: “Because, like, if I feel unsafe and no one is there to do anything about that lack of safety, it doesn’t really matter if I can put something on my door or not. I would also like to second the chemical weapons attack. That is just one of the craziest things that ever happened. And I guess every administration is hoping we’ll forget one day but, um, it did happen and I believe Barnard sent an email way too late and it was about a foul smelling odor and not a registered weapon that has been used by Israel against Palestinian civilians” (April 9).

**Students all seemed to recognize the complexity of questions about what expression the College should permit in residence halls, and ultimately, they did not come up with answers for bright lines that they found satisfying.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, they overwhelmingly contended that because the issues are complex, policy should prioritize dialogue as a response to speech conflicts, not punishment or widespread speech limitations.** (Indeed, counter to the narrative that the policy was implemented as a response to students’ inability to engage one another, the focus groups themselves provide evidence that students are eager to work through these complex subjects together.) Sometimes they suggested that commonly used

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<sup>4</sup> While the focus groups attended primarily to College administration policy, students were keen to note that some of the challenges they are facing are well beyond the College’s control. One challenge is the polarization of the population, and thus of their peers. Another is that social media allows access to peers’ expression in an unprecedented way, and can be fodder for interpersonal tension.

categories might help—for instance, differentiating between concerns about safety, security and comfort; between political and identity-based expression; and between political and hateful expression. But most of the time, after some discussion, they found these distinctions to ultimately be insufficient. One student said, for example, “I don’t think anyone has been able to necessarily figure it out” (April 8) and “I think it’s impossible to create a hard and fast rule that says, like, this is what’s permitted and this is what’s not” (April 9).

In the April 15 focus group, students said they thought they should feel “safe” and “comfortable” in their dorms, but they could not determine how the College could or should make that happen. This general difficulty became even clearer when our focus group facilitators asked each of the different groups to consider specific examples. They sometimes responded quickly that the determination was easy: “no” to a swastika or a confederate flag, but “yes” to a rainbow flag, gun rights, or abortion rights stickers. Still, they struggled to find agreement about the principles by which one was permitted and another not. And sometimes, one or more students thought an example was an easy example of prohibited speech, but others disagreed. This happened when someone raised the question of the slogan “Zionism is terrorism” (April 15). In all three focus groups, students seemed to conclude that a principle for where to draw the line against impermissible expression was hard to determine and, consequently, that such questions should be worked out through individual and group dialogues rather than limitations on expression. However, as we will discuss in more detail in the final section of this report, these calls for conversation regularly went hand-in-hand with expressions of distrust in the college’s senior leadership.

One of the most striking recurring themes from the focus groups concerned **how the implementation of the ban has had a negative effect on what they understand as Barnard’s mission and culture**. Some spoke of Barnard having a social-justice orientation and a reputation as a progressive college. Such a place, they said, would encourage the very kind of expression that this policy limits. We quote at length from one student, whose comments others seconded:

But I think that this has really made me question what our goal is as a college and what kind of students we want as a college, because I feel like before I came to Barnard, there was a completely different perception I had of what the school and the student body was encouraged to do. And then [there is] what the reality has been. I wrote my Common App essay about being the child of refugees, and about carrying political activism for refugees against genocide through my life. And that was something that I wanted to continue doing at Barnard. That was literally my application. [But] since I got here, I feel like ... there have been barriers and roadblocks in every way to keep me from fulfilling those things that I set out to do here. So I’m just confused about what the administration actually wants, because *I feel like there have been a lot of claims that Barnard encourages students to be involved in activism and socially well-rounded and holistic, but I have felt like in practice, it’s been the exact opposite of that* (emphasis added, April 9).

This student laments that she came to Barnard, at least in part, for its reputation for supporting activism and social awareness, but that her experience has been “the exact opposite.”

Students also described the policy as detrimental because expression matters to individual identity formation and to connecting with others—both important to college culture. Some talked about how expressions like pictures on their dorm doors help them to figure out and embrace their identities. Others said their ability to express their viewpoints on political issues had been an important part of how they formed connections with their peers. To be sure, at least one student disagreed, saying that political expressions on a closed door strike them as a barrier rather than an invitation to engagement: “But like, what’s so frustrating about ... when you put something on a closed door [is that] ... there’s no room for conversation in that context” (April 15).

Students at the Hillel focus group said they saw Barnard, before this year, as a place where they could build and nurture their self-selected affinity group, and presumably others could as well. But they, too, felt like the policies on expression, and perhaps the general tension about difference, had diminished the culture of plural social groups. Relatedly, students in multiple groups spoke of how the ban had removed their ability to connect with co-residents through what they put on their doors. One student missed the innocuous messages she and others would send or games they would play on door whiteboards, “I don’t know if [the ban is] an infringement on my rights or not. But I will say it takes away from the culture that we spoke about before—of the community—and no longer allows us to express ourselves in a positive way” (April 8).

Across the focus groups, perhaps the strongest point of agreement was that **the policy restricting almost all forms of expression on dorm doors was not working pragmatically**. Some expressed frustration that administrators did not act quickly enough to remove impermissible decorations. But mostly, the students said that the practical problem was resistance: they noticed that in response to the new policy, students started putting up more, not fewer, items on their doors. They talked about how some students who had never before put signs on their doors started to, seemingly to protest the new decoration policy. Many of these postings seemed to have nothing to do with politics. In other cases, they said, students responded to take-downs of political signage with new signage that was even more political. One student said the rule “has actually resulted in more people having things about it [Israel-Palestine] on their door, and then all the stuff that wasn’t about that got taken down[.] So it was very much counter effective and just led to everyone being very annoyed” (April 9). Some of the students in the April 15 focus group—who were appreciative of the policy at first—expressed what seemed to be serious disappointment at having come to the conclusion that the ban wasn’t working, but the lesson was clear: the policy had proved unenforceable. Students in the April 9 group described the policy as “ridiculous” from the start, and said that it was “making a problem of something that’s not a problem” (a point to which several students nodded in agreement), and ultimately, because of resistance, produced the thing it was trying to prevent.

Students also complained that the results were worse than just not being effective. One talked about it having created a rift between students living in the dorms and staff in Residential Life. She said that staff “are meant to be there to guide and support and protect us,” but when they “punish us for things that are not, in my mind, worthy of punishment,” as when they come to take things off of their doors, she feels that staff are failing in their support role (April 9). A peer observed a different, more widespread negative effect: a sense of students generally not being listened to.

I was basically gonna say ... the same thing that everybody else here said, which is that I think the policy of not allowing any sort of decorations or anything on the doors of residence halls is just creating more ... tensions and conflict. ... [My] roommate had some ... artwork up, and that got taken down, which just seems a little bit dumb. And since that's happened, I feel like everybody has just been less interested in going to, like, the RA events that are hosted in the quad or anything like that, because ... it just feels like nobody really wants to listen to anything that anyone has said.... [So] then what's the point (April 9)?

The discussion of the door policy in practice led to broader concerns about administrative action in this difficult time. Those who were disappointed that the policy did not work expressed disappointment more generally with the administration for not being able to guarantee their well-being—even if, they explained, the administration says it is trying to do so. Others expressed skepticism about whether student well-being was ever the purpose of the policy: they asserted that the policy was for optics, not student safety. These evaluations of administration stemmed not just from the dorm decoration policy but also from observations that students were being disciplined for other policy violations in a secretive and arbitrary manner. One said, “the door decorations are ... a symptom of the problem, which is that the administration doesn't really care about its students at all. Or like student opinion at all...admin cares more about, like, shareholders or whoever than any of us and wouldn't really care if we, like, died” (April 9).

Other students shared this general distrust of administrative action. A student said, “Now, students feel they will be penalized for anything that they do, including just being on the [executive] board of a club. And so I think, if anything, students do not have trust in this administration to defend them when it's necessary, or to uphold their rights when it's necessary” (April 9). Another said,

I'm really, really angry at this administration and I feel that whatever [the] result of this task force is, if any result, anything [that] ever comes to fruition is just way too little too late. And, it matters to me because I don't know why my voice and the voices of my friends are not even deemed worth listening to...policies like these are just like slaps in the face at this point, like it's clearly meant to punish students. It's clearly meant to demoralize them (April 9).

A senior said that this year has been worse than any other for how students see the administration: “I think for the most part, students feel like they’re in direct conflict with the people who are in the administration” (April 9).

## Looking Ahead

The dorm door decoration policy—like so many other policies instituted or applied during the 2023-24 academic year—exposed principled dilemmas for the College. Barnard is a place where diverse people and communities gather and interact but also have a sense of belonging to one institution. We have had and will continue to host many overlapping communities, and we can and will vigorously engage with one another because we are all part of the College. Yet, it has been made clear that we cannot be expected to act as one large, relatively homogeneous body, nor will we respond well to overly forceful direction from the administration. But with the administration’s support and participation, we can exist as many communities. We can and will be present together and learn from one another as diverse, different, and caring individuals and groups.

Like the students who participated in our focus groups, our task force sees the door decoration policy failure as indicative of broader policy issues. What focusing on the fallout of the policy does allow us to do is to understand how this specific issue prefigured the various crises that followed it. Accordingly, our recommendations start from the door decoration policy but travel outward from there.

Our task force recommends the immediate revocation of the dorm decoration policy implemented in February 2024. As explained above, the students in our focus groups almost universally declared the severe limitation of expression in dorms a failure, either of principled or practical considerations, or both. Instead, the College needs to allow for expression—even in dorms—and expect that expression to challenge students, perhaps especially during politically and socially polarized times. Before instituting any new limitation on expression in dorms, the College administration needs to seriously deliberate with students and ensure that there is support from representatives of students who will be affected and staff who will be implementing the policy. In the meantime, we recommend that students be advised to expect conflict and discomfort over expression in dorms and that staff be given robust support to help students through this.

As noted above, although students did not have definitive answers about how to draw a line between protected and impermissible expression, they did have some prescriptions, and one was to prioritize communication over punishment. One student acknowledged, “the Day of Dialogue did happen,” but “I didn’t think it was so successful, to be totally honest, because there were maybe 50 people in the room. And I can tell you, I knew 30 of them” (April 15). Students consistently reported that they want the administration to support them in having dialogue about difficult issues but they do *not* want the administration to direct that dialogue with its own programming and agenda. Some students stated strong opinions that when someone takes offense or feels discomfort, the staff response needs to be to open lines of communication. In



explaining why communication is more desirable and effective than punishment when the differences between protected and impermissible expressions are blurry, one student said, “There is no line. And I think that we should stop approaching it like there is [one]” (April 9).

Another strong, widely shared recommendation was for the inclusion of affected constituencies in policy development and implementation. Students were clear that the administration needs to consult with students affected and with staff who have to carry out the policy (in this case RAs) before adopting it. Even students who expressed appreciation for the policy said that consultation with the staff was important: “It'd be helpful to speak to people in ResLife and... have conversations before rather than after... going forward .... I do think it's important to have us at the table” (April 15). Observations like these strike us as protests against what [Gabriel Winant, writing in the \*Chronicle of Higher Education\*, has called institutional infantilization](#)—a practice of “[absorbing] students’ grievances and [managing] their experience, rather than treating them like equal and fully adult participants in the collective life of the institution.” The experience with the door policy reveals more general, structural problems with how few of the affected groups have been allowed to participate in decision-making processes at the College.

We would like to use this report to promote one important way the College can offer a structural solution to a structural problem. We need to institutionalize governance that does not treat constituencies as isolated groups for senior administration to consult, but rather as important collaborators in creative policy-making. We recommend the establishment of at least one permanent committee of students, staff, and faculty to address a myriad of issues like this one in order to try to create a campus climate by and for all of us. Our task force was a temporary one; with Jennifer Rosales’s departure from Barnard, it is not clear what it would look like in the coming academic year, which makes it all the more important to create a structure that is more permanent and accountable than a temporary task force. Therefore, we strongly recommend that another body be constituted to continue the critical discussions we have been able to have as a group of approximately equal numbers of these three constituencies. To assure trust and transparency for the future, the committee’s membership should be selected from representative or governing bodies of the constituencies (SGA for students, FGP or an elected representative for faculty, and an elected representative from staff, for example). Given that it is somewhat novel at Barnard, at least in recent years, to constitute a committee this way, some experimentation will be necessary; in addition, the charge of the committee may need to be amended beyond that of campus climate and expression and it should certainly go beyond a merely advisory task force if it is to address the problems of democratic participation that have emerged over the last academic year. We are confident, at a minimum, that the body should have the following characteristics:

- It should be permanent or regular, rather than ad-hoc
- It should have roughly equal representation from students, staff, and faculty
- Membership should be elected from the respective constituencies

The constitution of a committee that adheres to these recommendations is one substantial way that the College can address the challenges it and other institutions of higher education have

recently faced. We can imagine that such a committee is one that can play a role in facilitating the sort of engagement in policy-making and programming that students across all of the focus groups said that the College should prioritize. At several points in this report, we have observed the striking fact that students express desires to engage one another on contentious subjects *at the same time* that they express distrust of the senior leadership's agenda and ability to provide those opportunities. Whether this combination of desire and distrust has existed from the start or has come into effect as a result of the policies, communications, and practices that the College adopted over the fall and spring semesters is a question that we cannot answer definitively from what we learned while conducting the focus groups. But if Barnard is to meet the challenges it faces, then it is the view of this task force that it will have to create meaningful chances for students, faculty, and staff to participate democratically in how the College functions.