

An Open Letter to the Membership of the National Communication Association from the NCA Executive Committee

The National Communication Association Executive Committee acknowledges that our membership is witnessing a great deal of deliberative discourse, dissenting voices, and diverse viewpoints concerning the Presidential Address at the 2023 National Communication Association Annual Convention. Protecting free speech and academic freedom can be messy, with roadblocks that can stifle open dialogue and jeopardize our communal values. As a governing body of the National Communication Association, we reaffirm that NCA as an organization exists because of, and for, its members. This is a time for critical reflexivity, with the commitment to emerge from this process stronger and healthier as an organization, and with the reaffirmation of our [Credo for Ethical Communication](#) and to processes that center the IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Access) values outlined in our [Strategic Plan](#).

In seeking to create a coherent narrative of events, members of the Executive Committee have devoted more than 20 hours of meetings as of this writing, including receiving accounts from NCA elected officers and National Office staff. The voting members of the Executive Committee unanimously support this Open Letter to our Association members and to all others who desire to learn about our efforts and plans for next steps.

What Happened

The NCA President's Address is a significant and momentous celebratory occasion whereby the elected leader of our Association delivers a vision for NCA and for the discipline. This occasion is coupled with the Association's Honors and Awards ceremony along with a symbolic Presidential transition. Consistent with the themes of his candidacy, President Walid Afifi invited member voices to join in a collective performance as the 2023 Presidential Address. These voices, along with President Afifi, included: Sarah Amira de la Garza, Robert Gutierrez-Perez, Lore LeMaster/The Cacophiliacs (Ana Isabel Terminel Iberri, Tyler S. Rife, Megan Stephenson, Angela Labador, Liahna Stanley), Ahlam Muhtaseb, Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock, Bryan J. McCann, and Lionnell "Badu" Smith. Their collective voices were prepared to portray a critical [re]imagining of the possibilities for NCA and the Communication discipline and was entitled, "Let Us Imagine Our Future Together." This presentation did not occur as intended.

Through fact-finding and questioning, the Executive Committee has learned of a number of factors that we believe contributed to the events that unfolded on the afternoon of the scheduled Presidential Address. These include, among others:

1. Competing perspectives on the potential harm of performance scripts to the Association and/or to members.
2. Lack of clarity in the roles of NCA elected officers and some members of the NCA National Office as it relates to the Presidential address.

3. New National Office staff, who are in the process of gaining an understanding of the NCA culture that welcomes critique and critical perspectives, and
4. Insufficient empowerment, authority, and agency in the office of the elected NCA president as it relates to the Presidential Address.

What Are Our Next Steps

The Executive Committee commits to the following actions as next steps:

1. Charge an ad-hoc committee of the NCA Legislative Assembly to ensure a full review of events and related processes and roles that can be shared with the membership. This committee will:
 - engage in further inquiry into the events leading up to and after the Presidential Address;
 - closely examine processes and clarify roles of the National Office and the EC, and
 - produce a report to the membership within a 30-day period.

This Ad Hoc Committee will minimally consist of:

- a. A representative from the Communication Ethics Division
- b. A representative from the Public Relations Division
- c. A representative from the Activism and Social Justice Division
- d. A representative from the Organizational Communication Division
- e. A representative from the Training and Development Division
- f. A representative from the Freedom of Expression Division
- g. A past NCA president
- h. A non-voting representative of Board Source (a leading governance-focused non-profit association)

Following completion of the report issued by the ad-hoc committee, NCA's Task Force on Academic Freedom will work with the ad-hoc committee toward the implementation of recommendations related to the prioritization of academic freedom principles within NCA (including but not limited to this incident).

2. Issue personal apologies to Dr. Muhtaseb for the silencing to which she was subjected, and to all others who did not perform at the 2023 Presidential Address as a gesture of powerful solidarity.
3. Refund conference registration fees to all of the participants whose performances were canceled due to the dismissal of the Presidential address.
4. Extend offers to all the affected scholars to platform their performances at next year's convention and/or through virtual performances hosted on the NCA website.
5. Commit one of NCA's 2024 "Virtual Learning Opportunities" to the centering of Palestinian voices and the Palestinian experience (in the hands of a Palestinian-led

organizing committee).

6. Feature a second “Virtual Learning Opportunity” in 2024 that examines themes around genocide, its rhetorical construction, and discursive battles over the term in Communication and related disciplines.
7. Add Palestine-related resources to NCA’s anti-discrimination resource bank.
8. Examine the use, roles, and responsibilities of security personnel at future NCA conventions.

The EC encourages member feedback in all its forms and welcomes ongoing member involvement in the necessary change-making at NCA, consistent with our Strategic Plan. You may reach us at NCAEC@natcom.org. We also honor the many actions that are being taken independently from the Executive Committee as responses to the Presidential Address cancellation and related events, including commitments by editors of NCA journals to devote space for discourse, statements and actions developed by various NCA units, as well as NCA members organizing outside of official NCA-affiliated units. We will continue to engage as a body to consider additional responses as information and feedback is received, and to events as they unfold.

We recognize that dissent and speech that is critical of institutional practices allows for reflection, growth, and change and, as such, are essential actions in line with the spirit and letter of NCA’s commitments. In closing, we, as members of the EC, want to reassure all members that we remain committed to ensuring academic freedom and free speech at all NCA-sponsored events, publications, and outlets.

Sincerely,
National Communication Association Executive Committee Voting Members

Walid A. Afifi (President)

Vinita Agarwal (Chair, Teaching and Learning Council)

Jim Cherney (Chair, IDEA Council)

Roseann Mandziuk (Immediate Past President)

Jimmie Manning (Director, Finance Committee)

Raquel Moreira (Interim Chair, Mentorship and Leadership Council)

Marnel Niles Goins (1st Vice President)

Shaunak Sastry (Chair, Research Council)

Jeanetta Sims (2nd Vice President)

Candice Thomas-Maddox (Director, Finance Committee)

Richard West (Chair, Finance Committee)