

**Statement by University of Southern California Student Asna Tabassum,
Class of 2024 Valedictorian:**

I am honored to have been selected as USC Class of 2024 Valedictorian. Although this should have been a time of celebration for my family, friends, professors, and classmates, anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian voices have subjected me to a campaign of racist hatred because of my uncompromising belief in human rights for all.

This campaign to prevent me from addressing my peers at commencement has evidently accomplished its goal: today, USC administrators informed me that the university will no longer allow me to speak at commencement due to supposed security concerns. I am both shocked by this decision and profoundly disappointed that the University is succumbing to a campaign of hate meant to silence my voice.

I am not surprised by those who attempt to propagate hatred. I am surprised that my own university—my home for four years—has abandoned me.

In a meeting with the USC Provost and the Associate Senior Vice President of Safety and Risk Assurance on April 14, I asked about the alleged safety concerns and was told that the University had the resources to take appropriate safety measures for my valedictory speech, but that they would not be doing so since increased security protections is not what the University wants to “present as an image.”

Because I am not aware of any specific threats against me or the university, because my request for the details underlying the university’s threat assessment has been denied, and because I am not being provided any increased safety to be able to speak at commencement, there remain serious doubts about whether USC’s decision to revoke my invitation to speak is made solely on the basis of safety.

Instead of allowing the campaign of hatred to define who I am and what I stand for, let me therefore take this opportunity to tell you about myself.

I am a first-generation South Asian-American Muslim whose passion for service stems from the experience of my grandparents, who were unable to access lifesaving medical technology because they had been displaced by communal violence.

I am a biomedical engineer who learned the meaning of health equity through developing low-cost and accessible jaundice for babies whose darker skin color conceals the visual yellowing of their complexion.

I am a proud Trojan who loves my campus that has enabled me to go from building a walker to shipping medical gowns to Ukraine to writing about the Rwandan Genocide to taking blood pressure measurements for our neighbors in Skid Row.

I am a student of history who chose to minor in resistance to genocide, anchored by the Shoah Foundation, and have learned that ordinary people are capable of unspeakable acts of violence when they are taught hate fueled by fear. And due to widespread fear, I was hoping to use my commencement speech to inspire my classmates with a message of hope. By canceling my speech, USC is only caving to fear and rewarding hatred.

My identities and experiences inspired me to think outside the box—a mindset I cultivated at USC, and it is this very quality that contributed to my selection as USC Valedictorian.

As your class Valedictorian, I implore my USC classmates to think outside the box—to work towards a world where cries for equality and human dignity are not manipulated to be expressions of hatred. I challenge us to respond to ideological discomfort with dialogue and learning, not bigotry and censorship. And I urge us to see past our deepest fears and recognize the need to support justice for all people, including the Palestinian people.