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Inside Penn's highest governing body: The Board of Trustees, by the numbers

Two experts told the DP that Penn's board size and culture have played a role in how the University has navigated the national spotlight

JIN KWON
Senior Reporter

Amid a series of controversies and a leadership crisis in recent months, Penn's Board of Trustees has gained significant attention for how it operates as the University's highest governing body.

In light of the increased scrutiny of the trustees — some of which has come from former board members, like Marc Rowan — The Daily Pennsylvanian analyzed the board's size, demographics, and attendance records.

Using publicly available information, the analysis found that Penn has the second largest Board of Trustees in the Ivy League with 50 members — the majority of whom are white, male, and have backgrounds in financial services. Two experts told the

DP that Penn's board size and culture have played a role in how the University has navigated the national spotlight — and how it makes important decisions, like the eventual selection of a successor to former President Liz Magill.

The DP's analysis found that Penn's Board of Trustees, which has 50 members, exceeded both the Ivy League average of 37 members and the national private institution average of 28 members. Cornell University has the largest board in Ivy League with 64 trustees.

According to the Office of the University Secretary,

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ABHIRAM JUVVADI | PHOTO EDITOR

Penn Faculty for Justice in Palestine organized a die-in demonstration at College Hall on Jan. 29.

Pro-Palestinian faculty group sues Penn, aiming to stop transfer of documents to Congress

The complaint alleges that efforts to investigate the University over alleged antisemitism on campus have threatened professors' academic freedom

BEN BINDAY
News Editor

A group of Penn professors filed a lawsuit against the University, alleging a pattern of "McCarthyism" for preventing speech in opposition to Israel and seeking to stop the University from submitting documents to Congress.

The lawsuit was filed on March 9 by associate professor of Arabic literature Huda Fakhreddine and history and Africana studies professor Eve Troutt Powell in conjunction with Penn Faculty for Justice in Palestine, a collective of Penn faculty who say they are standing in solidarity with Palestinians. The complaint alleges that efforts to investigate the University over alleged antisemitism on campus have threatened professors' academic freedom.

The faculty hope the lawsuit will convince the University not to comply with the House Committee on Education and the Workforce's request for a plethora of documents pertaining to on-campus antisemitism, which they described as including "teaching files, emails, and other material for political scrutiny," according to a press release from PFJP.

"This nation is seeing a new form of McCarthyism, in which accusations of anti-Semitism are substituted for the insinuations of Communist leanings which were the tool of oppression in the 1950's," the complaint reads.

The suit adds further legal scrutiny to the University,

which is already facing a complaint from multiple Jewish students alleging a failure to combat antisemitism on campus.

The claim alleges that Penn is "privileging, protecting, and endorsing" pro-Israel speech over pro-Palestinian speech in the University's academic community. The complaint contends that the term "antisemitism" has been used "in egregious ontological error, to chill, punish, and end virtually all moral, political, legal, and other criticism of the nation-state Israel."

A University spokesperson said that Penn had not yet been served and had no other comment on the case. A summons was issued on Monday.

Fakhreddine and Powell specifically criticized the University's response to the Oct. 7, 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel, suggesting that Penn did not have a sufficient focus on free expression on campus and did not offer support to Jewish and Muslim students who have questioned Israel's policies.

"After October 7th, our protesting the beginning of Israel's retaliation against Gaza were met with the doxing of many of us — students, postdocs, staff and faculty — and

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Excerpts of depositions from Penn admin. offer new insight into Mackenzie Fierceton lawsuit

In his deposition, former Provost and Interim President Wendell Pritchett acknowledged that Fierceton had the right to a presumption of innocence

KATIE BARTLETT
News Editor

New documents released in Mackenzie Fierceton's lawsuit against the University in January provide new insight into the circumstances surrounding her allegations.

Penn administrators — including Deputy Provost Beth Winkelstein, Senior Vice President and General Counsel Wendy White, and former Interim Penn President Wendell Pritchett — gave depositions throughout June and July 2023, according to court documents. Though the lawsuit has been ongoing since 2021, excerpts of the deposition transcripts were only recently made public in case filings.

In her initial lawsuit, Fierceton alleged a connection between the University's investigation into her background and her efforts to determine whether the 2018 death of Cameron Avant Driver, a School of Social Policy & Practice graduate student, was the result of inadequate accessibility in campus buildings. The lawsuit also pushed back against the investigation — which focused on Fierceton's first-generation, low-income status — and asserted that the University aimed to discredit her.

In a statement to The Daily Pennsylvanian,

a University spokesperson said that Penn has filed a motion asking the court to dismiss the case because "there is no factual or legal basis" for Fierceton's claims. He described the student conduct investigation into Fierceton as "thorough and fair," adding that the Rhodes committee investigation also concluded there were "misrepresentations in the application."

"Discovery has confirmed what we have said from the outset," the spokesperson said. "Every witness, including Ms. Fierceton, has acknowledged that Penn had an obligation to notify the Rhodes Trust when questions surfaced about the accuracy of the materials submitted in support of Ms. Fierceton's scholarship application."

Fierceton and her lawyer Dion Rassias declined requests for comment.

On March 4, the plaintiff and defendants both filed motions for summary judgment in their favor on the case. The DP is in the process of reviewing Fierceton's and Penn's filings, which are part of a separate phase in the lawsuit.

In her applications to Penn and later the Rhodes Scholarship, Fierceton detailed her childhood, including an alleged history of physical abuse from her mother and sexual abuse from her mother's boyfriend. She also identified herself as a FGLI college student as a result of her estrangement from her mother and financial independence.

In November 2020, the University received an anonymous email alleging that Fierceton had fabricated many of these details. On Nov. 30, 2020 — approximately one week after the University received the email — Winkelstein called Fierceton for questioning.

According to a memorandum filed by Rassias in December 2023, Winkelstein stated in a July 2023 deposition that White and Deputy General Counsel Sean Burke scripted "all of" the questions that Fierceton was asked. The memorandum stated that — in the deposition — Winkelstein added that she proactively called Student Intervention Services before the questioning, recognizing that Fierceton may have needed support afterward.

Rassias contended in the memorandum that Winkelstein's proactivity was evidence that the Penn defendants "certainly knew that the interrogation would be extremely painful and difficult for the Plaintiff." He further



KYLIE COOPER | DP FILE PHOTO

New documents in the Mackenzie Fierceton lawsuit reveal new details about her allegations.

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