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MOVING UP

Dean Who Defended Free Speech Is Named Provost of Stanford U.

By *Megan Zahneis*

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Jenny Martinez, Stanford University's next provost

What's News

Months after her lengthy missive defending free speech made national headlines, Jenny S. Martinez has been named provost of Stanford University.

As dean of Stanford's law school, Martinez saw the campus through controversy after a student protest of a federal judge in March turned into a cultural flashpoint.

"As dean, she has been a champion of inclusion, and a clear and reasoned voice for academic freedom," Richard Saller, Stanford's interim president, wrote in his [announcement](#) of Martinez's promotion. She will take office on October 1.

The Details

Last winter Stanford Law School's chapter of the Federalist Society, a conservative and libertarian club, invited as a guest speaker Judge Stuart Kyle Duncan, who had been appointed to the federal bench by President Donald Trump.

But during his talk, Duncan [was interrupted](#) by student protesters, who called his judicial record anti-LGBTQ and who condemned his support for banning same-sex marriage and for preventing transgender people from using their preferred bathrooms.

When Duncan asked Stanford administrators to intervene, Tirien A. Steinbach, the law school's diversity dean, affirmed Duncan's right to speak but questioned whether it was worth letting him do so. After a backlash from conservative advocates and others in Stanford's administration, Martinez and Marc Tessier-Lavigne, then president of Stanford, apologized to Duncan in a [joint letter](#); Steinbach [went on leave](#) and then [resigned](#).

In a 5,000-word [letter](#) to the Stanford community, Martinez doubled down on the apology to Duncan, criticizing the behavior of the students as well as Steinbach.

“When a disruption occurs and the speaker asks for an administrator to help restore order, the administrator who responds should not insert themselves into debate with their own criticism of the speaker’s views and the suggestion that the speaker reconsider whether what they plan to say is worth saying,” Martinez wrote.

The Backdrop

As leaders across higher ed question how to respond to free-speech flaps, Martinez has served as an example. National commentaries hailed her memo as a watershed moment, signaling that college leaders were [becoming more open](#) to issuing forceful defenses of academic freedom and free speech. The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, for instance, [called](#) Martinez’s letter a “tour de force.” That stance often clashes with students, who increasingly say that colleges shouldn’t invite speakers to campuses if their views [might be offensive](#) to students of color and LGBTQ students, among other groups.

The Stakes

By elevating Martinez to its top academic post, Stanford is making a statement in the continuing free-speech debate. Leaders across the country will look to Martinez to uphold that stance, particularly as she assumes jurisdiction over not only the law school but also Stanford’s entire student body. She’ll also be second in command to Saller, an interim president who took the job after Tessier-Lavigne [resigned](#) amid claims of research misconduct.

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