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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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AAA Responds to Barnard College Tenure Debate

The American Anthropological Executive Board passed a resolution on October 5, 2007 in response to an online petition opposing the promotion and tenure of Dr. Nadia Abu El-Haj, an assistant professor of anthropology at Barnard College.

The aforementioned petition titled, "Deny Nadia Abu El-Haj Tenure" was written by an alumna of Barnard College. The petition has received over 2,500 signatures since it was posted online in early August.

The American Anthropological Association supports the position of Barnard College's President Judith Shapiro in this matter and affirms the Association's commitment to rejecting public petitions as a means for influencing tenure evaluations.

The AAA resolution text is as follows:

Resolution of the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association in response to the use of an online petition to oppose the promotion and tenure of an anthropologist at Barnard College:

The use of an on-line petition (entitled "Deny Nadia Abu El-Haj Tenure") to oppose the promotion and tenure of the anthropologist Dr. Nadia Abu El-Haj at Barnard College raises important questions about the making of judgments about scholarly merit.

The American Anthropological Association affirms that judgments about scholarly merit are legitimate only if they emerge in accord with the established practices of scholarly peer review. As a professional society dedicated to promoting anthropological sciences, we are thus directly concerned when efforts are made to judge the merits of scholarship in anthropology outside of those practices. It is not a function of the AAA to make judgments about the merits of candidates for tenure or promotion, and accordingly, our statement is concerned solely with matters of process.

We note that an on-line petition invites participation by persons who lack the relevant disciplinary expertise and even by some who have neither read the body of work in question nor examined with care other aspects of a candidate's professional work. Indeed, in the case of this specific on-line petition, those who have signed the petition have not been asked to give any indication of the basis of their knowledge about Dr. El-Haj's work. By contrast, a peer review letter that did not indicate what materials the letter's author had examined would be given no credibility.

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We are concerned that reliance on a petition of this sort will result in scholarly work being judged on the basis of perceptions of its author's political position, rather than on the grounds of the use of evidence and reason in the work's scholarly argument. It is disingenuous to suggest that this has not happened in this case, and the Association opposes, in the strongest terms, such reductionist politicizing of anthropological sciences.

In regard to a world area as ridden with violence and human conflict as is the contemporary Middle East, it is particularly important that educational and scientific institutions reject the use of non-deliberative means, such as the amassing of signatures on a petition, to dismiss scholarly work that challenges, or that is perceived to challenge, the positions of an interested party or parties.

For these reasons, the Association applauds the statement by Barnard College's President Shapiro that the review of Dr. El-Haj must be conducted in a manner that is no different from other reviews "in its rigor and its freedom from outside lobbying," and accordingly, we reject all attempts to influence tenure evaluations by public petitions.

Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association is the world's largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in anthropology, with an average annual membership of more than 10,000. The Arlington, Va.-based association represents all specialties within anthropology — cultural anthropology, biological (or physical) anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and applied anthropology.

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