

Antisemitism and Universities

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For centuries, the university has been a bellwether of the Jewish condition. At the same time, the state of the university has often been a mirror onto the health of the society in which it is located. The current attacks by the Trump Administration on the university in the United States, in the name of combating antisemitism, risk producing profound and lasting damage to higher education in the US. A number of universities have received demands to pay hundreds of millions, and in one case, one billion dollars, for their alleged inattention to antisemitism. Both because of Trump's own troubling characterization of Jews and because of the presence of administration officials whose words seem to cross the line into antisemitic rhetoric, it is not clear what exactly the Administration aims to fight. Is it antisemitism, or is it a certain kind of Jewish politics that they find anathema? Nor is it clear that impoverishing universities will redound to the benefit or well-being of Jews. The stakes are even higher. All of American society, including but not restricted to Jews, stands to lose if the golden age of higher education in the US comes to a crashing end in the next few years. Universities have not only been sites of huge economic innovation and mobility; they have bastions of American democracy, promoting ideals of equality, free expression, and the right to protest.

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In medieval and early modern universities, Jewish attendance was severely restricted, with a number of notable exceptions (for example, Jews were permitted to study medicine at the University of Padua in the 15th century and later at Leiden in the 17th century). This overall pattern of exclusion reflected the stigmatization of Jews as undesirables in Christian society.

The 18th-century Enlightenment heralded a new age in which religious bias, it was declared, would no longer be tolerated. Jews in Europe looked to education—and especially the university—as a means of casting off millennia-old shackles of prejudice. There were some encouraging signs. Jews were permitted to study in many fields from which they had been excluded previously. And yet, for much of the nineteenth century, they were not permitted to assume positions as professors. Moreover, many European institutions placed strict quotas on Jewish attendance at university, in some cases, limited it to 3% of the total student population.

The United States, at the turn of the century, seemed to represent a different model. It opened its gates to millions of immigrants from Europe, including more than two million Jews. Public institutions of higher education in the country were an important portal of entry into the American cultural and economic mainstream for many children of immigrants. In the first decades of the twentieth century, Jewish students were given access to colleges and universities, where they excelled in many domains of study. They achieved a degree of representation—over 20% at some top universities—far beyond their numbers in the general population. In response, Ivy League institutions imposed quotas on Jewish attendance from the 1920s to the 1960s, believing that many Jews were detrimental to a good social and cultural mix.

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The next half-century was a golden age for Jews in the American university. The percentage of Jewish students in elite universities rose, as did the number of Jewish faculty. Similarly, Jews broke through a remaining barrier by assuming leadership positions at institutions of higher education. Over the last decade, six out of eight presidents of Ivy League universities were Jewish. These developments reflect the opportunity afforded to Jews to enter previously closed corridors of power and influence in the United States. They also reflect the way in which colleges and universities have modeled what a broad, multicultural society could look like.

In recent years, the high percentage of Jews at leading colleges and universities has dropped. Some argue that a key reason is that college campuses have become sites of hostility toward Jews. Critics point to the protests against Israel after the Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, as evidence.

Indeed, there were instances of harassment and intimidation directed against Jewish students in the aftermath of October 7. College campuses have become challenging, particularly for those who strongly identify with Israel. The Trump Administration has waded into the fray by making exaggerated claims about how unsafe college campuses are for Jews. Its manifest weaponization of antisemitism against critics of Israel doesn't mean that universities should be lax in combating threats to Jews.

But we should know where the challenge really lies. The threat to Jews and to the university in the United States today does not emanate, in the first instance, from pro-Palestinian protesters. Rather, it comes, ironically enough, from new attempts to silence protesters in the name of protecting Jews.

The Heritage Foundation's "[Project Esther](#)" and President Trump's [Executive Order](#) on "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism" seek to stifle voices on campus by casting a vast

net to identify and potentially sanction those who disagree with the pro-Netanyahu view of Israeli policy. They are accused, incredulously, of belonging to a “ Hamas Support Network.” Not only do such claims stigmatize Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim critics; they are also directed with equal fervor against progressive Jews who oppose Israel’s brutal war in Gaza or its 58-year-long occupation of the West Bank.



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The consequences of these claims have been dramatic. Since his executive order in January 2025, President Trump has cut over \$400 million in funding for Columbia University over allegations of failing to combat antisemitism. More recently, he has threatened UCLA with our \$1.5 billion in withheld funds or fines. Several student activists—lawful residents of the United States—have been arrested for their pro-Palestinian activism, and the visas of more than 6000 international students have been revoked as of [August 2025](#). In the face of such pressure from the federal government, universities such as Columbia have chosen to arrive at settlements with the Trump administration, agreeing to pay huge sums of money and to accept outside monitors of their academic activity.

Such agreements do not promote the interests or well-being of Jews, who have benefited enormously from the social mobility that the university has provided. The proposed actions against dissident voices on American universities will upend the traditions of inclusivity and academic freedom that have served Jews well since the early twentieth century. And it should

be clear that the ultimate goal is not to protect Jews by rooting out pro-Palestinian protesters. It is to degrade American universities as they currently exist in order to subordinate them to the decidedly anti-liberal, authoritarian, and conformist agenda of the Trump administration. This agenda is antithetical to protecting Jews.

All concerned citizens should be alarmed by the plans underway. History reveals that imposing draconian restrictions on universities — whether in Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, or fascist South America— is a classic move by [anti-democratic regimes](#), which subsequently weaponize these policies to serve their own nefarious interests. We may well be on the brink of such a moment today, and Jews, above all, must be vigilant and resist destructive efforts justified in their name. If we do not, we will be contributing to the rapid decline of what was an illustrious golden age for Jews and the university in the United States.

RECOMMENDATIONS:



- ① **Resist the weaponization of antisemitism** by using the [Nexus Campus Guide to Identifying Antisemitism](#), along with other nuanced instruments (such as the Nexus and JDA definitions of antisemitism), in order to distinguish between legitimate speech and behavior, and hateful and discriminatory speech and behavior. In particular, these instruments allow for a more subtle determination of when anti-Zionism may become antisemitic.
- ① **Resist the call** in the [Trump Administration's Fact Sheet on Combating Antisemitism](#), as enthusiastically echoed and [acted on](#) by organizations such as [Betar USA](#), to identify members of campus communities on student visas who may be subject to deportation because of their support of Palestinian liberation.
- ① **Encourage college and university leaders to join together to take concerted action against efforts that diminish the independence of institutions of higher learning**, impose restrictions on free speech, and seek to identify and act against those deemed political undesirables. The administration's proposed steps will inflict grievous damage on campuses and universities, which have been such an important site of Jewish advancement in American society.
- ① **Invest in additional education about Jews** rather than in legal sanctions as a key tool to combat antisemitism.