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COMMENTARY

UC is not a welcoming place to Jewish students

"For myself and other Jewish and pro-Israel students, the atmosphere is poisonous. We feel attacked, ostracized, and threatened. Our identities are being rejected and our right to express our beliefs endangered. Our academic performance is being harmed unjustly." — a Jewish UC student

By Tammi Rossman-Benjamin

Special to the Sentinel

To make good on the "welcoming and inclusive" campus promised in the "Principles of Community" of its 10 campuses, the University of California has taken steps to heighten awareness of certain kinds of bigotry such as racism and sexism, offering university administrators sensitivity training in the subtlest forms of allegedly bigoted expression known as "microaggression." A document issued by the UC Office of the President has identified seemingly innocuous utterances including, "America is a melting pot" and "I believe the most qualified person should get the job" as examples.

Meanwhile, Jewish students on many UC campuses are facing what can rightly be called "MACROaggression" — longstanding and pervasive patterns of vicious, hateful behavior. In the past few years Jewish UC students have reported being harassed, assaulted, threatened, vilified and discriminated against, their property defaced and destroyed, and their events disrupted and shut down.

UC leaders cannot claim ignorance of this anti-Jewish bigotry. A widely-publicized 2012 study, commissioned by then UC President Mark Yudof, found that Jewish students on seven UC campuses

were confronting “significant and difficult climate issues” as a result of behaviors “which project hostility, engender a feeling of isolation, and undermine Jewish students’ sense of belonging and engagement with outside communities.” The study revealed that the primary sources of anti-Jewish sentiment were anti-Israel activities which challenged Israel’s right to exist and were fueled by anti-Zionism and Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movements.

Since the study’s publication, the campus climate for Jewish students has significantly deteriorated. Not surprisingly, almost all of the recent antisemitic incidents including swastikas on a Jewish fraternity at UC Davis, posters blaming Jews for 9/11 at UC Santa Barbara, and a UCLA student being told by student senators that her Jewishness would make her ineligible to serve in government can be directly linked to anti-Israel campaigns, especially BDS.

Yet despite the mounting evidence of anti-Jewish “MACROaggression,” there have been no UC initiatives to address anti-Jewish hostility, no sensitivity training for UC administrators, and no widely-circulated UC documents with examples of the anti-Semitic behaviors that have created an extremely hostile and threatening environment for many Jewish students. Not one.

Indeed, anti-Jewish “MACROaggression” is simply not on the radar. Why are administrators so well attuned to the subtle forms of some types of bigotry but unable to recognize even the most flagrant forms of contemporary antisemitism? Because UC currently lacks the single most essential tool for identifying and educating the campus community about the kinds of antisemitic expression that Jewish students are actually experiencing: an accurate definition.

That is why dozens of the world’s foremost scholars of antisemitism, approximately 60 religious, civil rights, educational and student organizations including the Anti-Defamation League and Hillel and thousands from California’s Jewish community have been urging UC to adopt the U.S. State Department definition of anti-Semitism, which provides an authoritative standard for determining when anti-Israel expression crosses the line into anti-Semitism. And, commendably, UC President Janet Napolitano herself has publicly expressed support for the State Department definition.

At their September meeting, UC Regents will consider a statement of principles against intolerance. If the Regents incorporate into their statement a reference to the State Department definition of anti-Semitism, or at least an acknowledgement of the well-documented relationship between certain kinds of anti-Israel expression and anti-Semitism, they will be affirming their commitment to ensuring a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students including Jewish students. If not, the Regents will be sending a loud and clear message to the California Jewish community: We do not care about Jewish students, and are unwilling to ensure their safety and well-being.

Rossmann-Benjamin is a UC Santa Cruz faculty owner and director of AMCHA Initiative, a nonprofit that combats anti-Semitism.