



Academic
Engagement
NETWORK

The Academic Engagement Network’s Section for Women Faculty, Section for Junior Faculty, Section for Jewish and Israel Studies, and Interest Group for Faculty in the Midwest Oppose Calls to Boycott Courses about Israel at the University of Chicago

The Academic Engagement Network’s Section for Women Faculty, Section for Junior Faculty, Section for Jewish and Israel Studies, and Interest Group for Faculty in the Midwest, representing scholars from all ranks and in various disciplines at U.S. universities and colleges, express deep concern and dismay regarding an ongoing campaign to delegitimize courses about contemporary Israel at the University of Chicago.

On January 27, 2022, the University of Chicago’s chapter of Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) created a [series of Instagram posts](#) titled “DON’T TAKE SH*TTY ZIONIST CLASSES.” These posts advised students to boycott “classes that serve as vehicles to spread Zionist propaganda on American college campuses,” specifically targeting “Multiculturalism in Israel,” “Narrating Israel and Palestine through Literature and Film,” and “Gender Relations in Israel.” The posts included the names of the courses’ professors/ instructors, and featured extensive, deeply hostile commentary about Israel inserted into the course descriptions in red type.

We are proud to be affiliated with the [Academic Engagement Network](#) (AEN), an academic nonprofit organization that works with over 800 faculty members on more than 250 campuses to oppose efforts to delegitimize Israel; support robust discussion, research, and education about Israel, the Jewish experience, and Jewish identity in the academy; promote campus free expression and academic freedom; and counter antisemitism when it occurs on campus.

While we acknowledge that these posts fall under the umbrella of protected speech, we find them disturbing for multiple reasons:

First, encouraging students to boycott a course stands against the principle of academic freedom and inquiry. Disturbingly, following such virulent social media posts, students may understandably be dissuaded from signing up for these courses for fear that they will be harassed and ostracized. Such an environment of prejudice hinders their ability to take advantage of the full range of the University of Chicago’s academic offerings and deprives them of the opportunity to learn about another country’s history, society, and culture, a crucial tool in our increasingly globalized world.

Second, the use of “Zionist” as a pejorative reeks of bigotry and casts as “beyond the pale” a core component of Jewish identity. At a time when antisemitic attacks have increased throughout the world, these posts imply that **any** engagement with contemporary Israel is inherently illegitimate and thus serve only to isolate Jewish students, many of whom already feel uncomfortable expressing their identity on campus. It is the responsibility of university leaders, faculty, and students to create a campus climate that is welcoming and inclusive, where *all* members of the campus community can express their

religious, ethnic, and cultural identities with pride, with confidence and with the assurance that they will not be persecuted for doing so.

Finally, and not least, these posts specifically target two Jewish women faculty members, one a visiting instructor and the other a graduate Ph.D. student. At a time when there is, rightfully, a greater emphasis in supporting members of marginalized communities, we find it reprehensible that these faculty members' academic expertise is being called into question and that their career opportunities threatened by a potential boycott.

For these reasons, we call on the administration at the University of Chicago to publicly condemn these postings and express support for the courses in question and the faculty members who teach them. Such measures would rightly highlight the University of Chicago's commitment to academic freedom, as represented by its offering of a wide variety of viewpoints on contemporary Israel by experts in the field. It is only through such affirmations that campuses can remain places of learning, dialogue, and growth.