

U.S. universities tighten rules to prevent protest rallies against Tel Aviv's atrocities in Gaza



New York, September 17 (RHC)-- As students return to campuses across the United States this fall, many universities have implemented new policies aimed at restricting protest activities, which critics say has a chilling effect on both students and faculty.

The new wave of administrative policies include encampment bans, severe restrictions on when or how demonstrations may occur, and suspensions of student organizations. Expanded conduct rules and harsher sanctions for violations often go together with these measures.

For instance, Case Western Reserve University now requires administration approval for protests, while Rutgers University demands protesters obtain permits. Indiana University bans “expressive activity” between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m.

University of California and California State University systems prohibit encampments and the use of masks to “conceal identity” across their 33 campuses. New York University takes a controversial step by unveiling new student conduct policies prohibiting criticism of Zionism.

These changes come in the wake of the widespread pro-Palestinian demonstrations in the spring semester, which called for universities to disclose and divest from financial ties to Israel.

Palestine Legal, a civil rights organization, reported that throughout the spring of 2024, universities experienced levels of student protest reminiscent of the Vietnam anti-war and South African anti-apartheid eras. In response, university administrators called in law enforcement to arrest more than 3,000 students, professors, and solidarity activists on more than 80 campuses.

These policy changes also come amid significant pressure from pro-Israel groups and lawmakers. U.S. Congresswoman Virginia Foxx, a Republican from North Carolina and chair of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, has demanded information from some universities about their plans to prevent disruptions, antisemitic harassment, and intimidation on campus this fall.

Adam Lehman, president and chief executive of the Jewish campus organization Hillel International, has encouraged universities to be more proactive this school year, putting in place bias-reporting procedures that are inclusive of and responsive to Jewish student complaints.

The U.S. Department of Education has also contributed to this shift. From Oct. 7, 2023 to this May, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the department opened 137 investigations into antisemitism and Islamophobia at universities and K-12 school districts. The office has admonished colleges for not having clear policies to assess and respond to reports of discrimination.

However, these policy changes have faced significant criticism from civil rights organizations and academic groups. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has condemned the new wave of administrative policies as “broadly chill students and faculty from engaging in protests.”

The AAUP argues that many of these policies are being imposed with little to no faculty input, bypassing the central role of elected faculty bodies in university governance.

Palestine Legal cautions that while these rules have been instituted to target speech critical of Israel, they can be used to prevent students from speaking out about other issues as well, such as climate change and police violence. The organization said it is working to ensure that students know their rights in this rapidly changing environment and have support if they face repression.

Edward Ahmed Mitchell, deputy director at the Council on American-Islamic Relations, urges universities to respect the rights of all students and avoid repeating the “heavy-handed enforcement” seen in spring.

“If they give students room to protest peacefully, and if they engage with students respectfully about their demands, then we can see a much more civil discussion on college campuses this fall,” Mitchell said.

At Columbia University, the school year began with the New York Police Department arresting student picketers demanding divestment on the first day of classes. At University of Michigan, four people were arrested, and two were hospitalized after police reportedly slammed students on the ground during a peaceful die-in demonstration.

Despite these new restrictions, campus pro-Palestinian activism has shown no signs of abating. National Students for Justice in Palestine has called for a “day of action” on campuses, declaring, “University repression will not stop us. Draconian speech codes will not stop us.”

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