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# A proper response to situation at Rutgers will keep us proud

by Keith Krivitzky

Special to NJJN

December 11, 2017

We should be proud of Rutgers, not embarrassed by, or even worse, anxious about the environment faced by students on the campus of the State University of New Jersey.

Rutgers has the largest Jewish population of any college campus in the country now. It has a brand-new Hillel facility that is the jewel of the Hillel system and the envy of universities around the country. Rutgers also has a world-class Jewish studies department and the nation’s largest on-campus Chabad, located on the New Brunswick campus.

Rutgers should be a great place to be Jewish — and it is — but a poor response to recent anti-Semitic incidents and concerns can put that situation at risk.

A 2015 study conducted by Brandeis University’s Steinhardt Social Research Institute found that Rutgers was among a few universities nationwide “where hostility toward Jews and anti-Semitic harassment are relatively high” and that “more traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes and tropes, rather than criticism of Israel’s politics, seem to be driving the perceived hostility toward Jews.”

Thus far, the university administration’s response to several incidents on campus reflecting this hostility has been inadequate. Instead of immediately decrying the vile and hateful remarks posted by a university professor on his Facebook page — and not just about Jews — the administration dithered and then attacked the newspaper that reported the incident. Then there’s the curious incident involving the appointment of a diplomat who, as a faculty member, previously defended the human rights record of the Syrian regime. And there have been several instances of other faculty members attacking Israel with accusations that resemble traditional anti-Semitic themes and double standards — which are defended under the guise of academic freedom and freedom of speech.

This does not encourage a positive, healthy environment for Jews or other students on the Rutgers campus.

We recognize that student life on campus has its own set of dynamics, and outside organizations piling on or “carpetbagging” on issues might not be helpful. However, the Jewish Federation in the Heart of New Jersey (as well as its partner, the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ) is proud to support several partners on campus engaging Jews and building vibrant Jewish life, including Hillel, Chabad, and the Rutgers Jewish Xperience — and we have a vested interest in the quality of Jewish life on campus.

One of the lessons our community has learned is the importance of decrying hate and bigotry wherever and whenever we see it, especially as the expression of hateful voices has multiplied in our society. We are raising our voices in concern now about the tolerance for such intolerance at Rutgers.

Just imagine students who are afraid of being proud and forthright about their Jewish identity because they feel a hostile environment or fear unfair targeting — or grading — due to their backgrounds?

We are also concerned that negative perceptions of Rutgers can contribute further to one of New Jersey’s biggest exports: millennials. Increasing numbers of young adults go to college outside the state or leave the state after graduation with no intention of returning. This should be of concern to Rutgers and the entire Jewish community of New Jersey. If young Jews see Rutgers as a less-than-safe space, they will look elsewhere and leave our local communities and state behind. Such a trend can turn our current pride in Rutgers having the largest on-campus Jewish population and being a great place to be Jewish to just a memory.

It is incumbent upon the leadership of the university to take decisive action in responding to these incidents and in presenting a proactive plan to ensure that such behaviors are not repeated in the future. An approach should be taken, similar to that applied in California’s state university system, to foster a culture of healthy inquiry and mutual respect on campus.

The Jewish Federation in the Heart of NJ in conjunction with the State Association of Jewish Federations and our partners on campus are engaging directly with the Rutgers administration to encourage these concrete and constructive steps, and were heartened by Rutgers. President Robert Barchi’s decision to suspend Michael Chikindas, the professor who posted the offensive Facebook remarks.

We encourage those who wish to share their concerns and play a positive role in ensuring that Rutgers University remains a great place to be Jewish to continue your support of federation’s work and that of our partners on campus. Please also share with us and NJJN feedback about your own experiences with anti-Semitism at Rutgers or your experiences of how a vibrant Jewish community on the campus enriched your college experience.

Together, we can ensure that Rutgers remains the home of the largest Jewish student population in the country and a great place to be Jewish.

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