

Searching for the study of modern Israel

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Michael D. Colson , THE JERUSALEM POST

For those who follow Israel's status on US college campuses, attention is naturally drawn to events taking place outside the classroom. One-sided academic panels, incendiary speakers sponsored by student groups, mock checkpoints and street theatrics are disturbing realities of student life.

A fuller picture, however, is both more nuanced and more positive. Over the past several years, there has been a significant increase in the number of courses being offered about modern Israel in colleges and universities, a trend that points to a growing disconnect between Israel's place inside and outside the classroom.

These findings come from a new report, "Searching for the Study of Israel," that was commissioned by the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and prepared by Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies. Among others, the Schusterman Family Foundation has spent considerable effort over the past several years to expand opportunities within higher education to study about modern Israel, and the foundation wanted to know if those efforts were taking root.

The results are encouraging.

AT 246 colleges and universities that were surveyed in both 2005-6 and 2008-9, there has been an almost 70 percent increase in the number of courses devoted to Israel. In 2005-6, of the top 20 national universities in *US News and World Report's* ranking, five offered no courses that focused on Israel and only three offered four courses or more. By 2008-9, those numbers had changed dramatically. Last year, all but one top-20 school offered courses focused on Israel, while 12 offered four or more.

In 2008-9, looking at a group of 316 top-ranked universities and liberal arts colleges, state universities and schools with large Jewish student populations, 90 percent offered at least one course that dealt in part with Israel, and almost half offered four or more courses. While the majority of courses came from history and political science departments, the 1,401 courses that dealt with Israel came from a range of academic fields.

This, according to the study's authors, "suggests a normalization of Israel as a subject within established disciplines." Thus, ongoing efforts to provide professors with the

knowledge and tools to add courses about Israel, placement of visiting professors from Israel, education of graduate students in Israel studies, support for the professional development of academics focused on Israel - the range of activities which our foundation and others have undertaken - demonstrate that change can slowly be achieved across the US.

THESE RESULTS are enlightening for many reasons.

First, while detractors seek to marginalize and delegitimize Israel, increased interest in studying and teaching about the country shows just the opposite - Israel is playing a more vital and central role in serious circles. Paying excessive attention to those who only criticize but do not seek to understand results in a distorted view of the campus experience, and short changes students and professors who are voting with their feet, and who are behind this burgeoning course offering.

Second, they underscore that those on the campus who are engaged in worn-out polemics, while loud and attention-grabbing, are also increasingly behind the times. The currency of their arguments is undermined by the data, which show that students and universities are investing in new, additional courses about Israel. Tired criticisms of everything Israeli are being rejected as students increasingly turn to courses where Israel is studied in a balanced, rigorous fashion.

Third, the depth of modern Israel is being explored across the academy. Israeli literature, film, music, sociology, economics and geography are all being discovered. As a result, the one-dimensional view of Israel simply as a locus of conflict is being replaced with a broader appreciation of its people, politics and challenges.

Passionate political debates - including about the Middle East - have an important place in campus life. But the fundamental mission of higher education is to prepare informed, critical, thoughtful adults. At universities and colleges across the US, the classroom is beginning to be reclaimed by the students and professors who believe in that mission, and whose critical inquiry into Israel offers a bright note for the quality of national discourse in years ahead.

The writer is director of Israel programs for the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

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