

## **Stephen Zunes: Chancellor's opposition to student resolution problematic**

UC Santa Cruz Chancellor George Blumenthal, in an all-campus mailing sent out Nov. 19, expressed his opposition to a recently passed resolution by the Student Union Assembly in a manner which has raised serious concerns among supporters of corporate responsibility and academic freedom. It is virtually unprecedented for a chancellor or other high-level administration to criticize student representatives for participating in a democratic process of debate and decision making, even on contentious issues.

As issue was a vote by the UCSC Student Union Assembly to reinstate a call for the University of California to divest from companies that profit from military support for the Israeli occupation or from companies that invest in illegal settlements or the illegal separation barrier in occupied Palestinian territories.

Many observers, on campus and off, found the chancellor's response problematic for a number of reasons:

First of all, the letter falsely claimed it was a vote to "divest from Israel," when in fact the resolution called only for divestment from four primarily U.S. companies that directly support the Israeli occupation.

Secondly, the chancellor's claim that taking this principled stance in support of corporate responsibility in reference to international law and human rights could somehow "have a chilling effect on individuals within our campus community" appears designed to discourage the very kind of activism that UCSC students have practiced for decades without interference from previous chancellors.

Thirdly, the letter implies that supporting a socially responsible investment policy would somehow contribute to a possible climate of harassment or worse for students who disagree. Based on similar divestment campaigns regarding apartheid South Africa, sweatshops and carbon polluters, however, there seems to be little merit to concerns that opponents of this initiative would be targeted in such a way.

Perhaps the most disturbing part the letter was Chancellor Blumenthal's claim that the resolution "may create an environment in which some of our Jewish students feel alienated and less welcome on our campus." The implication that "Jewish students" are a homogenous group who will somehow be offended simply by opposition to certain policies of Israel's right-wing government is ludicrous. Not only is opposition to the Israeli occupation widespread among Jews in the United States, Israel and elsewhere, Jewish students were among those who voted in favor of the divestment resolution.

This is why posting a letter conflating Israeli-occupied territories with Israel and conflating Israel with Jewish students is so problematic. In failing to make these critical distinctions, Chancellor Blumenthal is effectively equating opposition to what is recognized by the international community (including the U.S. State Department) as a foreign belligerent occupation and a call for divestment from corporations supporting it as somehow encouraging bigotry toward a minority group.

There are also concerns the chancellor's decision to express his opposition to the SUA resolution in such a public way could be intimidating for non-tenured faculty and others who might support this and other initiatives in support of human rights, international law and corporate responsibility. Indeed, the letter warns of how such

efforts “can exacerbate tensions and contribute to what some experience as a hostile environment” and ominously notes, how, “Globally, we’re seeing how hatred can lead to unimaginable acts of violence.”

Increasingly, well-funded right-wing groups supportive of the Israeli occupation have been pressuring administrators to crack down on activism and scholarship critical of such policies in the name of protecting the ethnic or religious sensitivities of students, usually by intemperate and exaggerated characterizations of the statements or scholarly work of those they target.

Anti-Semitism — like racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression — is a real problem that UCSC and other academic institutions should indeed take seriously. However, as noted in a recent letter to Chancellor Blumenthal from California Scholars for Academic Freedom, “While both federal and state law as well as university policy protect students from discrimination or antagonism based on their religious, ethnic, gender and other identities, it is completely unreasonable — as long as such discourse is conducted in a non-coercive and nonviolent manner — to try to protect people from hearing challenges to their political beliefs simply on the grounds of their identification with them.”

It is disappointing that Chancellor Blumenthal appears to be confused about this important distinction.

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