

## [Pro-Palestinian activism faces suppression on Catholic campuses](#)

In [my column](#) last month, I raised concerns over the decision by the Fordham University administration to refuse recognition of a Students for Justice in Palestine chapter, despite the approval of its application by the student government, making it the first university in the country known to ban the human rights group on their campus. In the face of widespread outcry over such suppression of free speech, the university is standing by its decision and has engaged in [disciplinary actions](#) against students who have challenged it.

Unfortunately, that New York-based Jesuit institution is not the only Catholic university whose leadership has suppressed student activism when it concerns the rights of Palestinians.

At Marquette University last year, the Students for Justice chapter initially received administration approval to erect a large wooden barrier symbolizing Israel's separation barrier in the West Bank. The barrier at Marquette included slogans and pictures from the actual wall illegally constructed in the occupied territory. The university [quickly removed it](#), however, determining that the "nature of the content of the display" was "likely to cause great offense," and declared that the Marquette administration "cannot approve the wall being displayed again."

When the chapter at DePaul University [organized a fundraiser](#) to support the legal fees of a local Palestinian American facing a deportation order in 2015, it was faced with a series of unspecified threats of violence over social media. The administration then refused to allow the dinner to go ahead unless the underfunded student organization pay the university to hire security guards, a demand they had not made previously for any other student event.

At St. Louis University in 2016, a critical question by an African-American student directed at pro-Israel speakers during a question-and-answer period resulted in event organizers [threatening to call campus security](#) to remove him. The student then left voluntarily, declaring that his treatment served as an example of what he called "Zionist fascism." In response, the university charged the student with a "bias related incident," and declared he had violated university policy prohibiting "disruptive behavior" due to the "manner in which he presented himself."

At Loyola University Chicago in 2014, the student government voted to recommend divestment of endowment stockholdings in Caterpillar, United Technologies Corporation, Raytheon and Valero, companies that are directly supporting the Israeli occupation and illegal settlements. (Caterpillar bulldozers, for example, have torn down thousands of Palestinian homes in the occupied West Bank and elsewhere.)

Loyola's president, [Jesuit Fr. Michael Garanzini](#), insisted that calling for divestment from multinational corporations supporting the Israeli occupation was "felt as extremely unfair by our Jewish faculty, staff and students." He reiterated claims by right-wing supporters of the Netanyahu government that the resolution was "anti-Semitic."

The provost, meanwhile, argued that it was "harmful and divisive" and "anti-Israel" to press for corporate responsibility in such a way.

The [student government president](#) noted the extreme pressure he and others had received from administrators, stating, "The *only* messages I received [in opposition to the resolution] were from concerned administrators," not from students themselves. He noted that the resolution was "in no way ... anti-Semitic. To critique a university's private investments ... is not the same as endorsing religious persecution."

However, the student senate, fearing reprisals, decided not to take up the issue.

It is unclear why the administration at this Jesuit institution would attack student human rights activists and pressure the student government to oppose a measure that simply called on the university to divest from companies supporting what the United Nations and virtually the entire international community recognizes as a foreign belligerent occupation. The resolution did not question Israel's right to exist or its right to self-defense, nor did it advocate an academic boycott or anything targeting Israel itself. It only addressed the occupation.

Another example of the Loyola administration's lack of tolerance of dissent came in 2014, when 15 students, some of whom were involved with the campus Students for Justice in Palestine chapter, tried to sign up at a table sponsored by the campus Hillel group for the [Birthright organization](#), which provides all-expenses-paid trips to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories for Jewish Americans, but not for Palestinian Americans. Following the refusal to allow them to sign up and demands that they leave, the group dispersed.

In response, Loyola suspended the chapter, [charging](#) it with bias-motivated misconduct, harassment, bullying, disruptive conduct, and — even though the students were acting as individuals — failing to register their "event." The subsequent hearing cleared the chapter of all charges except the latter, which the administration used as grounds to suspend the organization for the rest of the year. (The hearing also determined that the Hillel group also failed to register its tabling for Birthright, but was not similarly punished.)

Given the history of the Catholic church and many Catholic institutions, there is no question that Catholic colleges and universities need to exercise a special sensitivity to anti-Semitism and to ensure that Jewish students, faculty and staff are not faced with being unfairly targeted because of their faith tradition. Pro-Palestinian activists who engage in any kind of anti-Semitic activity should be held accountable, as should anyone else who engages in such bigotry. However, it is vitally important that this is not confused with legitimate political activity.

Part of the problem is [how anti-Semitism is defined](#). In recent decades, the Anti-Defamation League has evolved from a once-reputable civil rights organization to one that has repeatedly labeled Christian, Jewish and secular peace and human rights groups opposing the Israeli occupation as "anti-Israel" or even "anti-Semitic." (For example, in response to a [National Catholic Reporter column](#) I wrote in 2005 about the hardline Lebanese group Hezbollah's turn from terrorism to electoral politics — which I based upon findings of the U.S. State Department and research by reputable Middle East scholars — the Anti-Defamation League website proclaimed: "[Writer attempts to justify Hezbollah terrorism](#).")

Despite this, dozens of Catholic colleges and universities have brought in the Anti-Defamation League to engage in anti-bias training, effectively setting the standard as to what constitutes anti-Semitism.

It has long been recognized that Catholic universities have a right to restrict political activities by students and student organizations that run contrary to Catholic doctrine. However, opposing the Israeli occupation and supporting Palestinian self-determination are quite consistent with statements by the Vatican, America's bishops and other Catholic institutions. Instead, these incidents appear to be simply part of an attempt by right-wing administrators to stifle campaigns for corporate responsibility and human rights.

[Stephen Zunes is a professor of politics and international studies at the University of San Francisco.]