

JEWISH SCHOOLS TO COLLEGES: DON'T RECRUIT OUR STUDENTS UNLESS YOU CAN GUARANTEE THEIR SAFETY

BY JACKIE HAJDENBERG OCTOBER 31, 2023 2:10 PM



Close up of admissions office sign near a university campus. (Getty Images)

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(JTA) — Any college or university that wants to recruit students from two Modern Orthodox schools in New Jersey will now have to prove it can keep Jewish students safe, according to announcements from the schools.

Torah Academy of Bergen County, a boys school in Teaneck, and Ma'ayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls, located just blocks away, each told families on Friday that they were enacting new requirements for colleges that seek to meet with students on campus, a regular component of the college search process.

A third school in the area told families on Monday that it was “reevaluating our relationships with college admissions officers” but had not yet settled on any policy changes.

The announcements offer a concrete indication that antisemitic incidents on U.S. campuses following Hamas’ attack on Israel Oct. 7 and Israel’s military response could affect how some Jewish students decide where to go to college.

The incidents are unfolding at precisely the time that high school seniors must complete their college applications, and they add to a preexisting sense of unease among some U.S. Jews about the status of Jewish students on college campuses.

“We feel strongly that we cannot continue to invite college representatives to speak to our students as they have in the past,” TABC head of school Rabbi Shlomo Stochel and associate principal Rabbi Steven Finkelstein wrote in an email outlining new requirements for on-campus recruitment. “Your son’s physical and emotional welfare is too important to us.”

Going forward, the TABC and Ma’ayanot administrators wrote, recruiters and college representatives must now bring “a statement from their university leadership detailing their plans to protect and maintain the safety and security of our graduates on their campuses as Jews.”

The announcement comes in the wake of multiple antisemitic incidents on college campuses nationwide, including an eruption of violence at a pro-Palestinian rally at Tulane University; a situation where Jewish students were barricaded inside a library at Cooper Union during a pro-Palestinian protest; and most recently, where death threats were made against Jewish students at Cornell Sunday evening, specifically targeting the kosher dining hall.

Colleges and universities have also drawn criticism over their public statements about the violence in Israel, with prominent Jewish donors in a few cases vowing to cut off institutions that they said insufficiently condemned Hamas or allowed antisemitic sentiment to flourish.

The climate has so alarmed the Biden administration that the U.S. Education Department has given itself two weeks to create and present a plan to combat the wartime spike in campus antisemitism.

The goal of high schools' policy change is to increase pressure on the universities to act, the TABC letter says.

“It is our hope that our collective stance in prioritizing the safety of our students will compel universities to address the severity of the current situation,” it says. “Those who cannot or will not accede to our valid and just request will not be welcome here.”

The moment coincides with when high school seniors must make decisions about where to apply to college. Many universities use Nov. 1 — Wednesday — as an early decision deadline, meaning that students who apply by that date and are accepted are obligated to attend.

The New Jersey schools chose to send the emails ahead of that deadline, according to Rabbi Josh Kahn, the rosh yeshiva of TABC. Almost all of the school's graduates head to Israel for a year and then to Yeshiva University, the Modern Orthodox flagship in Manhattan, though others enroll at other colleges with large Jewish populations including New York University and the University of Maryland.

Kahn said his school isn't trying to close its doors to college recruiters.

“Our goal actually really is for our students to be able to go to college. The entire Jewish community's goal is that our students should be able to go to the university campus and feel safe. That's all we want,” he said. “We're not looking to not allow colleges on to recruit from our campus. So we would like to do everything we can to help colleges ensure that our students will be safe.”

Ma'ayanot said that in addition to asking college representatives to provide assurances about students' safety, it would also work with its own students to factor the campus climate about Israel into their post-graduation plans.

“We are working to educate our students about the Israel climate on various campuses,” said the school’s letter, signed by four administrators including Head of School CB Neugroschl. “Just as a thriving observant Jewish community is a vital factor, it is crucial to make sure that a college is a safe place for Jewish and pro-Israel students. It is our hope that our collective efforts will help students make wise and informed choices about their future.”

Paul Bernstein, the CEO of Prizmah, the North American network for Jewish day schools, said the school’s demands are appropriate.

“Safety for Jewish college students is paramount, and colleges should be able to demonstrate how they would enable students to live a full and active Jewish life on their campus, without fear or threat,” Bernstein said. “Jewish day school alumni are proud leaders in Hillel and other programs on campus, in support of positive Jewish living and Israel. We expect college administrations to ensure that is true not only at a time of war, but in years to come for future students.”

Other Orthodox high schools in a broader network are still discussing how to approach the college admissions process, according to Kahn, who said a meeting is planned on the topic.

Joseph Kushner Hebrew Academy and Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School, Modern Orthodox schools in nearby Essex County, told families on Monday that they were rethinking admissions practices as application deadlines neared.

Head of School Eliezer Rubin said in a letter to families he believed that “universities have allowed a toxic ideology to fester, and that ideology manifests as raging, aggressive and overt anti-Semitism.” He named four schools — Cornell, Cooper Union, Tulane and Columbia — where recent incidents had induced fear for students’ safety.

“They believe that they could take our families for granted. ... We need to dissuade them from the notion that they are entitled to our children by mere virtue of the fact that they are prestigious institutions,” Eliezer Rubin wrote. “The privilege is for these universities to educate

our students, not the other way around. It is just that: a privilege. Not a right.”

Rubin concluded, “Put simply: If a university cannot keep our students safe, we cannot in good conscience send them there.”