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Why can't California students go to Israel?

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How do you nudge the largest four-year college system in the United States to change its mind and greenlight its students for study at Israeli universities?

Answer: It takes the combined voices of politicians, student activists, a raft of Jewish organizations, influential citizens, and Israeli diplomats and emissaries.

Take the California State University system (CSU or Cal State), with 23 campuses and 420,000 students, which shut down its Study Abroad program in Israel nine years ago, during the height of the Second Intifada.

CSU — not to be confused with the University of California system, with Berkeley and UCLA among its 10 campuses — based its 2002 decision on a U.S. State Department warning against travel to Israel, which currently also targets such countries as Mexico, Kenya, Colombia, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

The warning about Israel is still in effect and urges U.S. citizens to “refrain from all travel” to Gaza and the West Bank, to “remain vigilant” while in Jerusalem and to exercise a “high degree of caution” at restaurants, nightclubs, places of worship and bus terminals throughout the country.

While the University of California, as well as the State University of New York, have reinstated their Israel programs, and most private universities, including the Ivy League institutions, pretty much ignored the government warnings all along, CSU has cautiously stuck to its ban.

Speaking for CSU, Leo Van Cleve, director of international programs in the office of Chancellor Charles B. Reed, cited his primary responsibility for “the safety and security of our students” as the chief reason for keeping the ban in force.

During the remainder of 2011, Van Cleve said, he will conduct a “risk assessment study,” consult with such Israeli institutions as the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, Ben-Gurion University and University of Haifa, and develop guidelines for a resumption of the program.

If all goes well, and the situation in Israel remains stable, Van Cleve is looking toward the first group of CSU students departing for studies in Israel in the fall of 2012.

Van Cleve said he has held numerous discussions with government officials, community supporters of Israel, Israeli diplomats, and CSU faculty and students, and that he is “always interested in what people have to say.”

Those who have been pressing for a favorable decision range from student advocates to legislators and Israel's visiting deputy foreign minister, and they are confident the Israel study program will resume next year, having exerted respectful but persistent persuasion to hold the CSU administration to its announced plans.

The main players, working separately or in combination, include:

Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC), consisting of 33 organizations ranging from Americans for Peace Now to the Zionist Organization of America, has been steadily urging American colleges to reactivate their study programs in Israel under the banner “Let Our Students Go.”

ICC executive director Stephen Kuperberg points out that CSU is not alone. “There are still quite a few institutions, such as the University of Michigan, reluctant to lift the ban as long as the State Department travel warning remains in effect.”

In encouraging American universities to resume or expand their study programs in Israel, Kuperberg sees ICC's role



A Hebrew University of Jerusalem Rothberg International School student works at an archeological dig site.

mainly as "helpful collaborator."

His associate Andrea Sorin noted, however, that to get the administration's attention, any successful advocacy must start with sufficient interest among students.

Key players in such an effort are the Israeli shlichim (emissaries) assigned to Hillel chapters on some 30 campuses by the Jewish Agency for Israel.

One shaliach, Yohai Shavit, has been busy on the CSU "campaign" since last December, concentrating mainly on the students and faculty on the Cal State San Francisco campus.

The 26-year-old Shavit doesn't buy the perception that today's Jewish college students are less interested in Israel than those in years past.

"The real difference is that students today are interested in finding their own connections to Israel," Shavit said. "In a sense, they are more individualistic and sophisticated in mapping their own paths, which reflects their more sophisticated relationship to life in general."

A standard pitch doesn't work anymore, Shavit observed. "We have to personalize our approach. Some students may respond for religious reasons, and for others the motivations may be political, a matter of personal identity or an urge to see things with their own eyes."

About half of Shavit's prospects have participated in the Birthright Israel experience and, in general, applicants are not deterred by fears of terrorist attacks or border fighting.

Alexander (Ally) Poret, an 18-year-old freshman at San Francisco State, said she is unconcerned about physical risks, and her parents in Tarzana are encouraging her plans.

However, she is still undecided whether to study in Israel, Germany or Spain and said her Judaism won't play much of a role in her ultimate decision. More important is whether the chosen foreign university will have the courses to advance her future career in the hospitality and tourism industry.

While chancellors of public universities like CSU pay attention to student and faculty activism, they are particularly sensitive to the voices of state legislators, who control large chunks of annual budget allocations.

So when Daniel (Danny) Ayalon, Israel's deputy foreign minister, visited California recently, he made a point of explaining the importance of student exchanges in meetings with the leaders of the state Assembly, Speaker John A. Perez, and of the Senate, President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, as well as with Gov. Jerry Brown.

Perez, for one, phoned CSU Chancellor Reed to urge him to reinstate the Israel study program, and it probably didn't hurt that Perez also serves as an ex-officio CSU trustee.

Israel's two consuls general in California, Akiba Tor in San Francisco and Jacob Dayan in Los Angeles, also added their discreet but persistent voices.

Besides Perez and Steinberg, other legislators also made their case to CSU's Reed, including Los Angeles assemblymen Michael Feuer and Bob Blumenfield, chair of the Assembly budget committee, whose district includes Cal State Northridge.

Blumenfield was perhaps the most ardent advocate, to the point that he jumped the gun, and the CSU timetable, by issuing a news release in April with the somewhat immodest headline "Blumenfield Gets CSU to Reinstate Israel Study Abroad Program."

Jewish organizations mobilized their expertise for the cause, foremost the Jewish Public Affairs Committee, the political lobbying arm of the state's Jewish federations, social service agencies and defense organizations.

Cliff Berg, JPAC's legislative advocate, said that he and Caron Spector, the organization's executive director, invested "a substantial amount of effort" in explaining to legislators that the security situation in Israel had greatly improved since the CSU ban went into effect.

The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles channeled its advocacy through its membership in JPAC, said Catherine Schneider, the Federation's senior vice president for community engagement.

"This was a real team effort and showed what can be done when we all pull together," she said.

Equally active in the JPAC effort was the San Francisco federation, represented by its Jewish Community Relations Council.

An additional ally was the national faculty organization, Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, representing 60,000 academics on U.S. campuses, said executive director Samuel Edelman.

Given all the efforts, how many American college students actually study in Israel?

The most authoritative source is the Washington, D.C.-based Institute of International Education (IIE), whose latest jewishjournal.com/.../why_cant_californ...

figures, for the 2008/09 academic year lists the number as 1,958.

That represents a 15.7 percent drop from the previous year's figure of 2,311, which, however, was the highest number recorded for the past decade.

When the figures are counted for the current academic year, they will include about a dozen U.S. students who left their studies in Cairo and transferred to Israeli institutions when anti-government protests erupted in Egypt.

Not surprisingly, in 2002-03, at the height of the Second Intifada, the U.S. student count in Israel dropped to 340, gradually rising over the following years.

But here's where the number game, and the study abroad figures in general, become a bit tricky.

The IIE count includes every American student enrolled in an Israeli institution of higher learning for a year, semester, study tour or summer course, as long as his or her home college in the United States awards academic credits for the Israel study.

That leaves out many American students who study in Israel on their own and have to sacrifice automatic re-enrollment and recognition of academic credits, as well as substantial financial help by their home institutions.

No one appears to have a precise count for the number of independent students, frequently from universities like CSU that do not have a formal study abroad program in Israel.

Gil Artzyeli, Israel's deputy consul general in Los Angeles, after informally checking with Israeli and American sources, believes that the number of uncounted students may be as high as 1,000 per year.

While IIE public affairs director Sharon Witherell acknowledged that her numbers were probably conservative, Artzyeli's count, experts say, is probably on the high side.

Given the time and efforts by Israeli universities and representatives abroad, why is it so important to the Jewish state, with all its other problems and priorities, to attract students from the Diaspora, especially Americans?

There were many answers, frequently emphasizing the excellence of Israeli universities, but perhaps Shavit, the Israeli emissary in San Francisco, put his finger on the most crucial point.

"I consider the connection between Israel and the Diaspora as the state's raison d'etre, and student exchanges play a key role weaving such ties," he said.

"Israel represents the core element of Jewish identity," he added, "and without Israel, the Jewish people cannot retain their sense of peoplehood."

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