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Denial on Campus: How Antisemitism Affects College Faculty and Students

Sarah H. Hall

This Notes in Brief contribution explores instances of Holocaust denial on college campuses and addresses issues of academic freedom for faculty as well as students. The author explores questions regarding how we teach the Holocaust and how to better decrease denial and antisemitism.

Higher education might seem an unlikely place to encounter seemingly backward ideas like antisemitism and Holocaust denial, but it is in fact a real problem among students and faculty at colleges and universities. Particularly in the United States and Canada, recent years have seen several professors accused of antisemitism, either for outright hate speech outside the classroom or for espousal of antisemitic views on campus. Students, too, have been guilty of antisemitic speech and Holocaust denial. Some have carved swastikas into their Jewish peers' residences or thrown Nazi-themed parties. Others have made misguided historical arguments as part of a poorly vetted class assignment.

What do recent events tell us about Holocaust denial on college campuses and what might that suggest for the future of Holocaust education? These are the questions I hope to explore in this paper. First, I focus on Holocaust deniers in faculty positions, their arguments about the protections of academic freedom, and the different consequences they face for antisemitic speech. Second, I explore students and their relationship to antisemitism and Holocaust denial, particularly as it relates to their rights to free speech and expression.

Academic Freedom and Deniers on the Faculty

Holocaust denial has appeared among academics in the guise of free academic thought and debate. However, there are different levels of denial in the classroom, which means there is also a

difference in the severity of consequences (or any action taken by college administrations) as a result of this denial. Some teachers have incorporated questionable content into their classrooms and curriculum, ranging from simulations (considered inappropriate in Holocaust education) to badly worded questions that leave the existence of the Holocaust up to interpretation. This is a difficult problem because many teachers do this out of ignorance. They know that Holocaust education is, if not required, then greatly desired, and seek out information about these events that may come from biased sources. This sort of problem has inspired educational stakeholders such as Facing History and Ourselves or Echoes and Reflections to provide guidance and resources for instructors. Recently, the United States Congress passed the Never Again Act which allows for millions of dollars in funding for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum to develop and disseminate training on Holocaust education (Braunstein, 2022).

While better training and resources may address the well-meaning but ignorant instructors, it is more difficult to determine how we might handle others who have outright denied the Holocaust in the classroom. One might expect that Holocaust denial would earn a professor immediate expulsion from a college or university, but this is rarely the case. Feldman (2019) writes that a professor at Arkansas Tech University was honored with a posthumous scholarship in his name despite the fact that he was accused of assigning “Holocaust-denying books” to his students and was “briefly removed from teaching duties before being reinstated” (para. 5). This is not only a problem in colleges, but in secondary education as well. Joseph DiMarco, a history teacher in Ontario, Canada, was removed from his position in 2019 and had his teaching certification revoked after he “spent so much time teaching his own unapproved Holocaust [denial] instructional work that the students fell behind in what they were supposed to be learning from the actual curriculum” (Bessner, 2022, para. 12). DiMarco’s dismissal and decertification was a first for Ontario, made easier by DiMarco’s decision to discuss and push these views in his classroom. When professors are dismissed

for views they admit to holding but *deny* having shared in the classroom, the institution must often find other reasons with which to explain that dismissal. Instead of firing the professor for their views (expressed on campus or not), they instead must find “a reason to investigate and fire them over something unrelated, after they’ve said something controversial” (Goldstein, 2022, para. 1).

Others have been outspoken Holocaust deniers *outside* of the classroom, while keeping their views quiet on campus. Arthur Butz, an electrical engineering professor at Northwestern University, has continued to spout denial rhetoric outside of his official capacity as a professor, though he has not addressed denial in the classroom, and he has escaped sanctions from his administration because of that restraint (O’Neil, 2017). In autumn of 2021, Perimeter College math instructor Larry Coty was accused of making antisemitic posts online, though he did not appear to share those beliefs in the classroom. Nearly one year later, he appears to still be employed there as an assistant professor (Jaben-Eilon, 2021). Kaukaba Siddique, an English professor at a historically black college in Pennsylvania, spoke at a pro-Palestinian rally not associated with the school. His anti-Zionist comments there led to further investigation into his “past statements that the Holocaust was a ‘hoax’ intended to buttress support for Israel” (Berrett, 2010, para. 3). Siddique claimed his statements were protected as part of academic freedom, “as an example of a questing mind asking tough questions” (Berrett, 2010, para. 4).

Siddique’s defense brings up an interesting question. Does academic freedom allow for the denial of established fact? If so, who is responsible for deciding what is fact and what is not? The institution? Experts in the field? The government? If the academy decides to punish or silence those who speak out against established facts, then any revisionist thought in any field could come under attack. Some believe that we must allow for the protection of Holocaust denial in order to protect academic inquiry in other areas because “academic freedom [is] a value that survives only if it protects remarks we despise as well as those we endorse” (Nelson and Schaefer Riley, 2010, para.

30). Consider the history of science and, particularly, Nicolaus Copernicus's assertions of a heliocentric solar system, which went against the accepted facts at the time but were later proven correct. If academic freedom is meant to allow for progress and updated thinking, then we cannot police facts as accepted facts can sometimes change.

According to the United States justice system's Blackstone Principle, it is preferable that ten guilty men go free than one innocent man be imprisoned. This principle carries over into academic freedom. Better that a person who challenges known facts and spouts antisemitic rhetoric is allowed to remain in the academy than for an academic on the cutting edge of a new theory to be ostracized when they might turn out to be completely correct.

Should Holocaust denial be the exception here? After all, denial of the Holocaust involves the denial of the multitude of evidence available and there is seemingly no proof of the Holocaust that would ever change the mind of deniers. In this way, it is not a revisionist historical argument but an antisemitic argument. If Holocaust denial is by definition antisemitic, then it is hate speech, not academic discourse.

Students and Holocaust Denial

What happens when students, rather than faculty, are the ones exhibiting denial behavior (intentionally or not) or are the ones responsible for deciding on the veracity of Holocaust deniers' claims? For this paper, I have divided antisemitic student actions into two categories: students who intentionally deny the Holocaust or participate in antisemitism or hate speech and students who *unintentionally* deny the Holocaust because of poorly conceived assignments or exercises.

Intentionally antisemitic incidents are not rare on college campuses. In the first few months of 2022, swastikas were painted or carved on walkway and buildings at more than twenty colleges across the United States, including Kent State University, New York University, the University of

Georgia, and the University of California San Diego (“Search and Filter Data,” 2023). These are just a few examples of the hundreds of antisemitic incidents reported by the AMCHA Initiative in the first five months of 2022. In May, university presidents from across the United States gathered for the University Presidents Summit on Campus Antisemitism to discuss possible responses to antisemitism when it occurs on their campuses. *Hillel International* president Adam Lehman told the *Jerusalem Post* that “university leaders are our most important allies in confronting antisemitism on campus” (“Higher Education Groups,” 2022). But how can they successfully reduce antisemitic incidents on their campuses?

For example, can antisemitic incidents (even those outside the classroom) be addressed with student codes of conduct? Can students be held accountable, according to college policies, for racist themes for a party that occurs off campus? Can they be disciplined for these types of activities?

One example makes it very clear how difficult it is for a university to handle racist actions by the student population. Randolph-Macon College, a private institution in the suburbs of Richmond, Virginia, includes in its student handbook a “student bill of rights” including provision II-A, which states that “students have the right to participate in free discussion, inquiry, and expression” (“Student Bill of Rights,” n.d.). This became a problem when one of its fraternities took part in a racist “United States versus Mexico”-themed party and Randolph Macon announced plans to discipline the parties involved and suspend the fraternity’s activities while they investigated further. According to Kruth (2013) from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, the student bill of rights at Randolph-Macon makes clear that “students should, therefore, be able to host parties with offensive themes and dress in controversial costumes without being subject to investigation and discipline” (para. 6). To deny students the right to express themselves and to reprimand them for doing so would mean that the college was reneging on its promise to safeguard students’ rights. This could apply to something as innocuous as “streaking” or to something as nefarious as a mock

slave auction. Without clear indication from the college of what is considered free expression and what is considered hate speech, there is much room for interpretation.

Finally, students can suffer from badly designed assignments such as one that asked students to argue for or against the existence of the Holocaust. In this case, eighth grade students were provided with three sources – two from popular history websites and one from a denial group – and asked to write an essay in class about whether the Holocaust occurred. Whether the instructor intended this to be an open-ended question or a rhetorical one, many student submissions showed that they were “expressing doubt or flatly denying that the Holocaust occurred” based on the evidence made available to them (Yarbrough, 2014, para. 2).

When students are presented with this type of assignment, whether it is misguided or malicious, they might be misled into making denial statements or thinking that there is more room for interpretation and opinion than there actually should be. The ramifications of this could be severe. They might actually think there is room for debate on something like Holocaust denial, or they might believe in the history of the Holocaust, but their argument has still been put into the world. Future employers might come across these written ideas and assume that they accurately express the thoughts of their potential hire. One of them might run for office before someone digs up their past college paper arguing against the existence of gas chambers based on faulty information provided by their instructors rather than on actual fact. In the digital age where papers cannot simply be shredded or thrown away, bad assignments can live forever, with students paying the consequences.

Ideas for Further Research

Holocaust denial has infiltrated higher education in varied ways and must be met with equally multifaceted opposition. Faculty and student conduct are two pieces of the puzzle, but

Holocaust education and its efficacy in discouraging Holocaust denial also makes up a large part. Does Holocaust education prevent antisemitism and, by extension, denial? The Anti-Defamation League, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and many others think so. Proponents of human rights education, though, assert that teaching about the Holocaust does not make students more likely to behave more ethically or be upstanders in the future. Wisse (2020) wrote that “anti-Semitism in the United States has spread *in tandem* with increased teaching about the Holocaust,” rather than decreasing as the population becomes more educated (para. 4). This could mean that the message of Holocaust education is not reaching far enough, or it could mean that the education itself is backfiring. Is it possible that the way we teach the Holocaust might make denial worse? These are questions without easy answers, but if our goal for Holocaust education is to decrease denial and antisemitism, perhaps they are questions that must be considered.

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