

NOLAN FINLEY | Opinion

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Finley: UM to create \$20M antisemitism center



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The University of Michigan, a school with a history of embracing Jewish students but where many Jews now say they feel uncomfortable, is committing \$20 million to create an institute to study and combat antisemitism.

President Santa Ono is expected to announce the institute perhaps as early as today's Board of Regents meeting, according to two sources, one close to the university and one connected to the Jewish community. Neither agreed to be quoted ahead of the official announcement.

Half of the funding is coming from private donors, led by UM Trustee Ron Weiser, a Michigan graduate who has funded a number of academic, medical and athletic initiatives throughout the university. That \$10 million will be matched dollar-for-dollar by UM.

"It represents an effort by UM to turn the tide on campus," says Rabbi Eli Mayerfeld, chief executive of the Holocaust Memorial Center in Farmington Hills, who said he's discussed the center with Ono. "This is an institution recognizing that this is not a short-term fix, this is a generational problem that must be addressed."

Details of how the institute will operate won't come until the official announcement. But it is expected to be a separate academic center, most likely in the College of Literature, Science, and Arts.

As described, it will not take a pro-Israel stance, but rather encourage dialogue between various groups with the goal of creating a better understanding of the factors that drive antisemitism.

UM will be among a handful of colleges with centers devoted to the study of antisemitism, including Indiana University and New York University, which announced the creation of its institute last month.

University campuses are at the center of the pro-Palestinian movement in this country. The protests and anti-Israel slurs are often morphing into the harassment of Jewish students and both subtle and direct expressions of hate.

At UM, a student-led push for a campus-wide vote to condemn Israel as a genocidal state was quashed by Ono.

The president sent a letter to parents this week discussing the environment on campus.

"The issues raised by the ongoing violence in the Middle East are ripping our community apart, pitting one group against another and engendering very real fears about safety and security on campus," Ono wrote. "It needs to stop."

A donor I spoke with, who did not want to be identified, expressed hope the center will counter the vast amount of misinformation that has led, among other things, to Israel being categorized as a colonizer in a land where Jews have lived for more than 3,000 years.

"Antisemitism is not going to go away," he said. "If you can better understand it and disseminate facts, perhaps some of our future leaders who are coming to campus will have a better understanding of this."

The need for such an institute surpasses the current tensions. Antisemitism is the oldest form of hatred, one that has persisted in every generation, everywhere Jews have lived.

"What makes antisemitism unique is that it is not only a hatred of Jews," says Rabbi Mayerfeld. "It's an overarching conspiracy theory that Jews are behind all of your troubles, no matter who you are. It's a unifying principle of hate."

"In every time and place, it represents itself in its own version. Whatever your problem is, it's the Jews' fault."

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