

News

MIT joins Harvard and Penn on list of schools facing federal civil rights investigations

By Andrew Lapin

(JTA) – The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of California, Davis, both of which have recently experienced widely publicized episodes of conflict around Israel, are among six new institutions facing U.S. Department of Education investigations.

The department has indicated it is taking a newly aggressive approach to addressing it and Islamophobia on campus since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war and is announcing new investigations at a rapid clip, dramatically increasing the pace of civil rights inquiries that it opens.

All of the investigations relate to allegations of mistreatment owing to “shared ancestry,” but the department does not publicly reveal the incidents or complaints that cause it to open inquiries. None of the latest targets would comment on their investigations’ nature, and many said they were not told why they were being investigated.

Still, it is almost certain that at least some of the investigations are related to antisemitism.

MIT President Sally Kornbluth, who is Jewish, came under heavy criticism at a recent congressional hearing for failing to say whether calling for the genocide of Jews would violate university code. The school recently decided to partially suspend pro-Palestinian student protesters who staged a disruptive event on campus property.

MIT’s communications department did not immediately return requests for comment about its investigation. The school had previously been the only one of the three represented at the congressional hearing without an active federal investigation, as the Department of Education has previously announced inquiries into Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania.

And UC Davis entered the news in October when a professor, Jemma Decristo, posted threats to “Zionist journalists” on social media. “One group of ppl we have easy access to in the US is all these zionist journalists who spread propaganda & misinformation,” Decristo wrote on X, formerly Twitter, on Oct. 10. “They have houses w/ addresses, kids in school[.] They can fear their bosses, but they should fear us more.” The post concluded with emojis of a knife, an ax and blood drops.

A UC Davis spokesperson said the university could not comment on the current status of Decristo’s employment, but the professor’s faculty page has been removed from its website.

“UC Davis is committed to fostering a climate of equity and justice where all can feel welcome and thrive, free of harassment or discrimination,” UC Davis spokesperson James Nash told JTA, adding that the university would be fully cooperating with the investigation. “We take all claims of harassment

seriously.”

The other new active investigations are at the University of Illinois at Chicago, Drexel University, and two public school districts: one in Springfield, Illinois, and the other in Chandler, Arizona, a suburb of Phoenix. The schools join an expanding roster of dozens of active civil rights investigations on campuses across the United States since Oct. 7, including ones involving antisemitism at Harvard, Columbia, Rutgers and Tulane.

The opacity with which the office has treated its civil rights investigations has frustrated some university administrators. While some schools have indicated to JTA that they know what their investigations are related to, others have said they were not informed.

“It’s frustrating to know that you’re under investigation but you don’t know what for,” one communications staffer of a university under investigation, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter, told JTA. “At the same time, it is the Department of Education and we don’t want to antagonize them.”

None of the schools that responded to requests for comment would say whether their investigations were related to antisemitism.

A spokesperson for UIC said the university “strives to be a place where everyone feels welcome and where all people – no matter what color, race, ancestry, age, sex, interests, sexual orientation including gender identity, religion, disability, national origin, or marital status – can share perspectives and viewpoints to learn from one another,” but would not comment on its Title VI investigation.

A Drexel spokesperson similarly said, “Drexel does not tolerate acts of bias, discrimination and harassment.” On Oct. 11 the president of Drexel said the university was investigating a suspected case of arson outside a Jewish student’s dormitory.

A spokesperson for Springfield Public Schools District 186 told JTA their investigation was related to a complaint “filed by a parent on behalf of their child” but would not say what it was related to. Last year a high school student in the district faced hate crime charges in connection with antisemitic graffiti found at the school.

A spokesperson for Chandler Unified Schools told JTA it was “unable to provide details” about their investigation. The school district experienced an antisemitism controversy in 2021 when a woman at a school board meeting accused “the Jews” of developing the COVID-19 vaccine.

Opening an investigation does not mean the Department of Education believes the complaint has merit, only that it falls under the department’s purview.

Happy Tears

By Lauren Sachs

Lauren holds a bachelor’s degree in English and Psychology, and a Master’s Degree in Social Work, from the University of Michigan. After completing advanced clinical training at Yale University, Lauren worked as a therapist and consultant in a variety of settings. During her time in Jewish Toledo, Lauren has received the Harry Levison Young Leadership Award and the Shining Light Award, and is currently a board member of the Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo. Lauren is also the author of a forthcoming book about her late husband, his joyful approach to life and work as an oncologist, and how examining his life helped her better cope with her grief.



When I received an unexpected phone call from my local area code on the morning of August 23, 2023, I had no idea that I would learn a fundamental lesson on loss. Given the ubiquity of unwanted spam phone calls in our modern society, I would normally let such an unidentified call go straight to voicemail. In this case, I answered the call, curious

but also concerned that it could possibly be related to the welfare of my two daughters. Instead of alerting me to a family emergency, I found a familiar and friendly voice from the Jewish Federation on the line with a surprising question: was it true that I was a singer and would I be willing to share my gift with a group of local seniors the very next day?

As it turns out, Ohio’s unpredictable late summer weather had resulted in the Metropark’s cancellation of a musical event where our community’s seniors would enjoy lunch and listen to some musical talent. Instead of listening to the musical stylings offered by the park system, I would be the stand-in talent on our Federation’s campus. I had been anticipating August 24, the three year anniversary of Brad’s passing, as a difficult day but had not made any specific plans other than attending morning yoga. Therefore, I quickly agreed to be of help. Given the short notice and lack of musical accompaniment, I opted to sing some a cappella songs which were particularly meaningful to me. While I thought I could enhance the performance with some brief anecdotes about the reason for my selections, I initially had not intended to disclose the personal significance of that day. My plan changed midway through my performance when an audience member commented about how moving he had found the lyrics to the song “Candle on the Water.” He said he was inspired by the idea of having a guiding light to lead one through a dark period in life. After he spoke, I decided to reveal the importance of that day and talk about how powerful the concepts of perseverance and resilience had been to me over the past three years.

While music and singing have always been special to me, having the opportunity to share this part of my life and offer some thoughts on my path to healing could not have been more meaningful that day. It felt joyful to express my emotions through song and to bring some happiness to others during what could otherwise have been a purely somber occasion. As I sang and shared about my life, not only was I met with an attentive and appreciative audience, but I was also able to better manage the painful memories associated with the day Brad died. By giving of myself, I created a new and life-affirming memory, substituting a feeling of contentment for the desolation I might have experienced. Though I have always believed strongly in the concept of altruism, the lesson that was reinforced for me on that day of remembrance was about how much giving to others uplifts both the giver and the receiver. I could not be more grateful for the reciprocity of kindness shown to me that day as I shared my life and my music, just as I am for the opportunity to continue writing and sharing both the happiness and the tears along my path of healing.