

Social Distancing Brings New Challenges, Opportunities for Jewish Students

WRITTEN BY

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Social distancing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has affected America's college campuses in myriad ways. While the cancellation of the [NCAA March Madness tournament](#) was perhaps the most visible disruption for non-students, the dozens of campuses that became ghost towns overnight have created new realities for undergrads.

Jewish student leaders at North American [colleges were coming off a particularly bruising fall semester](#) — and that was before learning that the coronavirus would effectively be ending all on-campus classes and student programming for the remainder of the academic year.

With an unprecedented amount of time off campus ahead for students comes an opportunity to organize and firm up relationships with other students in lockdown situations. Others can plan to get ahead of anti-Israel initiatives, which organizers have announced [won't take place until the fall](#).

But focus on ongoing issues for Jewish and pro-Israel student activists seem to be a constant, despite social distancing. Students dedicated to ensuring fair treatment of Israel and Jewish communities will need to find alternate ways to continue being active and effective in their advocacy efforts.

The challenges are abundant. Almost immediately after campuses began shutting down, the [National Students for Justice in Palestine](#) announced a “[Virtual Israel Apartheid Week](#)” to replace on-campus Israel-bashing set to take place that week, [signaling](#) that their efforts would persist despite COVID-19 closures. The SJP chapter at University of Maryland at College Park even held an [event](#) linking the coronavirus and Israeli occupation, despite news that Israel and the Palestinian Authority had announced a collaborative effort to slow the spread of the virus.

Social distancing is not hampering campaigns to divest university funds from Israel. They have seamlessly shifted to online activities their persistent hatred of Israel. At Columbia University, the student body will participate in a [referendum](#) on the matter. A similar campaign at Rutgers University shows [no signs](#) that an online-only campaign will slow anti-Israel student efforts. Pro-Israel students, both Jews and non-Jews, at these and other campuses need to shift the entirety of their efforts from in-person advocacy to online outreach.

Students not facing imminent threats have opportunities to think proactively about the future of campus Jewish life and take this time to get going on fall initiatives without also having to contend with the hustle and bustle of an on-campus semester.

Large-scale programs such as an [Israel Summit at the University of Michigan](#), held earlier this academic year, require extensive periods of planning. A quiet spring, paired with a summer break, gives ample lead time for students and makes larger campus programs more feasible to organize.

Coalition-building is a critical area of engagement for Jewish communities on campus and maintaining partnerships (friendships, really) becomes infinitely more challenging without the structure of a not-social-distancing campus. Situations like COVID-19 test the depth of campus organizational partnerships, so student leaders must utilize this relatively quiet period to ensure that Jewish student groups are proactively offering friendship and camaraderie to partner campus groups.

In addition to shoring up relationships on campus, student leaders can utilize this period to communicate the actual goings-on on campus to a wider community that is perennially invested in the plight of campus Jewry. Some [student leaders](#) have begun regularly sharing their experiences in Jewish publications; the American Jewish community needs to hear more of these voices. Now is the perfect time for students with ideas to turn them into thought pieces.

Proactive engagement need not wait until September. American Jewish organizations are adapting to the new normal by developing [innovative programming](#) on web-based platforms. Students can draw from the programs rapidly being rolled out across the country and harness the wide reach that Internet platforms can offer.

Coronavirus may necessarily dictate where and how students live and socialize, but it need not affect the drive to continually improve Jewish life in college. The pandemic provides a singular opportunity for students to take stock of their communities and work to grow Jewish community engagement in creative new ways. Hostile voices aren't quieting during quarantine—and neither will Jewish student leaders' voices.

Zev Hurwitz is the American Jewish Committee's director of Campus Affairs.

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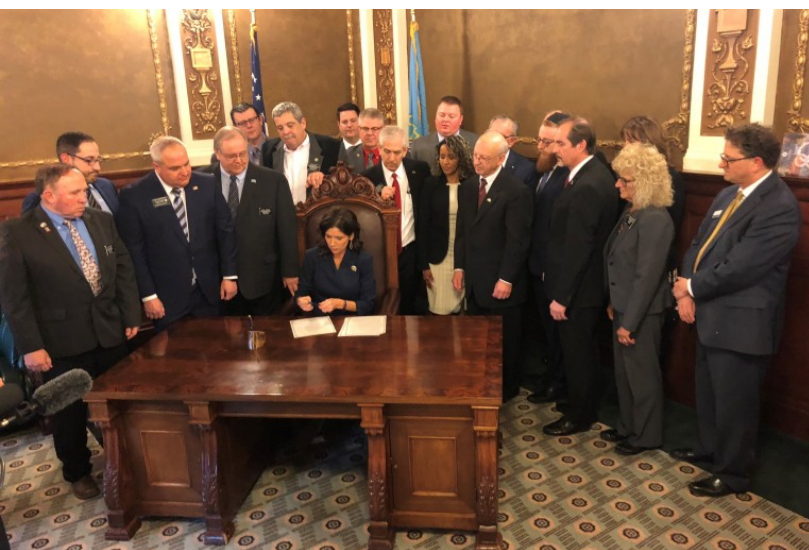
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