



Brandeis Commends Risch Senate Letter on Anti-Semitism in Middle East Studies Programs

Washington, D.C. (March 9, 2023) – The Louis D. Brandeis Center commends Senator Risch (R-ID) and his senate colleagues on their [recent letter to the Department of Education](#), highlighting concerns about taxpayer-funded anti-Semitism on college campuses. The letter to Secretary Cardona, signed by fifteen U.S. senators, questions whether the Department of Education is properly enforcing a Higher Education Act (HEA), Title VI requirement that federally funded college programs must “reflect diverse perspectives and a wide range of views.” It is apparent that many of the federally funded Near East and Middle East Studies programs show extraordinary bias against Israel and have been driving increased anti-Semitism in American higher education. Senator Risch and his colleagues have commendably underscored this issue with the Department of Education.

The Brandeis Center raised public awareness of this issue in our [2014 whitepaper](#), *The Morass of Middle East Studies: Title VI of the Higher Education Act and Federally Funded Area Studies*. As *The Morass* explains, many university-based Middle East Studies programs have misused federal Title VI funds, which were intended to provide a pipeline of well-educated, multi-lingual recruits for America’s defense and national security agencies. Over the years, the purposes of this program have been perverted, as Middle East Studies programs have become propagandizers of politically monolithic anti-Zionist indoctrination. This serves neither the purposes of the federal program nor the aims of higher education. Congress wisely responded to this problem by requiring grant recipients to certify that they would provide diverse perspectives and a wide range of views. Unfortunately, recent reports suggest that the Education Department is not taking seriously its role in this process.

Worse, as the senators recognize, the anti-Zionist ideological bias of these programs may be exacerbating the rise of campus anti-Semitism. The Risch letter explains that these programs and the professors who oversee them engage in actions that constitute anti-Semitism under the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) [Working Definition of Antisemitism](#). The IHRA definition makes clear which actions are inherently antisemitic while still allowing for criticism of Israel. Some examples include holding Israel to a standard not required of any other democratic nation, drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to Nazi Germany, or denying the Jewish people the right to self-determination.

LDB has long advocated for reform in the Department of Education’s oversight and enforcement of the HEA, recommending that the “department should evaluate university plans and performance to ensure that Diverse Perspectives are included. Universities should play their role as well, reforming Title VI programs from within, ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives, providing appropriate program review, and establishing a grievance procedure as a protection against noncompliance.”

In recent years, investigations have continued to uncover anti-Semitic and anti-Israel bias at many universities which receive Title VI funding from the Department of Education. From 2010 to 2013, UCLA's Center for Near East Studies spent the majority of its events focusing on [biased portrayals of Israel](#). In 2019, the joint Middle Eastern Studies program between Duke University and UNC Chapel Hill received a letter from President Trump's Department of Education for providing a [biased curriculum to students](#) and failing to meet legal requirements under Title VI. A [recent study](#) also found "160 academic departments at 120 U.S. colleges and universities issued or endorsed wholly one-sided, anti-Israel statements containing rhetoric that meets the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of anti-Semitism."

The Department of Education states that their "[Absolute Priority 1](#)" for grant selection and distribution goes towards applicants that "explain how the activities funded by the grant will reflect diverse perspectives and a wide range of views and generate debate on world regions and international affairs." Nevertheless, Education Department documents acknowledge that their grant reviewers are not evaluating the assurances that grantees provide of their compliance with the statutory requirement on academic diversity, acknowledging that "the reviewers will see [the diversity] statement; however, it is not evaluated as part of the [TRF] and selection criteria." This sends universities a signal that the Education Department is not taking their statutory requirement seriously.

Sen. Risch has properly requested that the Department of Education answer the following questions, which will shed light on whether Title VI requirements are being disregarded, by April 28, 2023:

1. To what extent have college and university programs in the United States used federal funds on speakers and programs that meet the IHRA working definition of antisemitism over the last decade? If the Department of Education does not know because you are not sufficiently reviewing grantee reports on HEA Title VI activities, why is the Department not enforcing the law?
2. Has the Department of Education ever evaluated applicants' viewpoint-diversity statements? If so, when did it stop evaluating those statements? What was the reasoning for that decision?
3. Does the Department of Education understand its failure to evaluate viewpoint-diversity statements sends an unmistakable signal it does not place importance on this issue? If the Department doesn't even evaluate these statements, how can the Department differentiate between those applicants who are making sincere efforts to address this problem and those who are not?
4. Please outline the Department of Education's plan for ensuring programs and professors on college and university campuses receiving HEA Title VI funding are in compliance with federal requirements requiring diverse perspectives.
5. What is your best estimate of how many colleges and universities across the U.S. have become unsafe for Jewish students? How can the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights and other offices ensure Jewish students have demonstrated reasons to feel safe on campus?

We look forward to Secretary Cardona's response to these important questions. We continue to encourage the Department of Education to investigate the anti-Semitic nature of many of their grant recipient programs and clarify their grant selection process. Sen. Risch and his colleagues have taken an important step in ensuring that the Department of Education maintains its dedication to promoting diversity and that federally funded programs are held accountable if they do engage in anti-Semitism.