

Education Department Orders Duke, UNC to Revamp Mideast Program; Government says joint curriculum reflects anti-Israel bias, raising alarms over academic freedom

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FULL TEXT

WASHINGTON—The Education Department ordered Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to overhaul their joint Middle Eastern studies program, which the department determined after an investigation presented students a biased curriculum.

The federal government rarely intervenes in the intricacies of college curricula, but the agency has broad authority to demand changes of schools that accept federal grants and financial aid. The department under Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has taken an unprecedented role in addressing what the Trump administration has called pervasive anti-Israel bias at colleges and universities.

Mrs. DeVos has publicly criticized activists who support "Boycott, Divest, Sanctions" policies against Israel over its treatment of Palestinians, a movement the secretary once called a "pernicious threat" on college campuses. The department's civil rights chief, Ken Marcus, previously ran an advocacy organization that filed civil rights complaints against BDS groups on campuses, arguing that they discriminated against Jewish students.

In a letter it issued to the two schools in August after a monthslong investigation, the department concluded that the curriculum doesn't align with guidelines for a \$235,000 federal grant the program receives for international studies and foreign language programs.

"Federal funding is conditioned on a demonstration that a given center program is a 'national resource,'" the department's assistant secretary for postsecondary education, Robert King, wrote in the letter. "We are concerned that most of the Duke-UNC [Center for Middle Eastern Studies] activities supported with Title VI funds are unqualified."

The New York Times first reported the delivery of the letter.

Mr. King wrote in the letter that the Middle East program's emphasis on foreign-language instruction was unclear and took issue with the extent of its cultural offerings, saying they didn't advance U.S. economic or national security goals, and pointed specifically to a conference on art and film.

"Although Iranian art and film may be...subjects of deep intellectual interest and may provide insight regarding aspects of the people and culture of the Middle East, the sheer volume of such offerings highlights a fundamental misalignment" between the university's goals and those of the federal government, the letter states.

The department also concluded that the Middle Eastern studies program, among other things, "offers very few, if any, programs on the historic discrimination faced by, and current circumstances of, religious minorities in the Middle East."

The investigation found that the program put "considerable emphasis" on the positive aspects of Islam, while not attempting to similarly demonstrate the positive aspects of Judaism and Christianity. The letter stated that the program's offerings were unduly focused on "advancing ideological priorities."

The department ordered the two universities to submit a revised curriculum, listing events it plans to host and the professors it employs. The universities were given a deadline of Sept. 22, before the department awards new

grants at the end of the month.

In a statement, UNC-Chapel Hill said it is "committed to working with the department to provide more information about its programs." Duke didn't respond to a request for comment.

The letter's demands, particularly those taking issue with the viewpoints of the program's courses and professors, raised concern among advocates of free speech and academic freedom. Suzanne Nossel, chief executive of PEN America, a nonprofit group promoting freedom of expression, said that, while the letter raises legitimate concerns if federal funds are going toward courses that don't prepare students to speak Middle Eastern languages, as the grant requires, its reference to ideological positions is troubling.

"Where it gets tricky is that a piece of this seems to touch on a sort of ideological policing," Ms. Nossel said. "The Department of Education needs to be scrupulous that they're not policing viewpoints."

As reports of the letter circulated, some advocates went further, accusing the Education Department of anti-Muslim bias, a notion the agency rejected.

"Pro-Islamic programming isn't the concern—it's the lack of diversity and foreign-language learning," spokeswoman Angela Morabito said in a statement. "The department is absolutely not criticizing the school for teaching the positive aspects of Islam."

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