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# Suspension of pro-Palestinian student group at Northeastern stirs debate

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 14, 2014

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Northeastern University has suspended a student group that advocates for Palestinian human rights, and is weighing disciplinary action against two students, after members of the group conducted a controversial leafleting campaign.

Students for Justice in Palestine was suspended March 7, nearly two weeks after it slid 600 “mock eviction” notices under dorm room doors to draw attention to forced evictions of Palestinians by the Israeli government. The group says the college’s actions infringe on students’ free speech rights.

“It’s just really disappointing when they single out our

group and try to silence us based on our political viewpoint and our message,” said Tori Porell, a 22-year-old senior and a leader in the group.

But Northeastern says it sanctioned the group because it repeatedly has flouted campus policies and procedures, most recently when it failed to obtain approval to distribute the fliers. A university spokeswoman says the group also has disrupted other student group events, failed to attend student organization leadership council meetings, and vandalized university property — a statue of a trustee.

“The issue here is not one of free speech or the exchange of disparate ideas,” the spokeswoman, Renata Nyul, said in a statement Thursday. “Instead, it is about holding every member of our community to the same standards, and addressing SJP’S noncompliance with longstanding policies to which all student organizations at Northeastern are required to adhere.”

Some at Northeastern, including the campus Jewish group Hillel, criticized the distribution of the eviction notices as an effort to rile others up through a mix of shock and fear. The Hillel group’s director, Arinne Braverman, called the effort “a campaign of intimidation and fear used to manipulate public opinion against Israel.”

Chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine on other campuses around the country, including at Harvard University, have carried out such campaigns in the past several years, often stirring controversy. But the incident at Northeastern is believed to be the first to prompt discipline from administrators, according to students in the group and lawyers from the ACLU, who are backing the students.

Two students face disciplinary hearings over their role in distributing the fliers. It’s unclear what the punishment might be, though it likely would fall short of expulsion or suspension.

“The fact that speech may be controversial or upsetting to some doesn’t make it hateful or a crime,” said

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Sarah Wunsch, a staff attorney for the Massachusetts chapter of the ACLU. “Northeastern wants to be recognized as a world-class university. World-class universities do not censor speech in this way.”

Students for Justice in Palestine is urging supporters to contact university leaders and to sign an [online petition](#) calling for its reinstatement. As of Thursday evening, the petition had more than 4,400 signatures.

The students not only have the backing of the ACLU, but also from the Center for Constitutional Rights and the National Lawyers Guild, Wunsch and Porell said.

Jewish Voice for PeaceBoston, which opposes the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, called on Northeastern to end the suspension of the student group.

“Jews and Israelis themselves hold a wide range of views on Israel, and there is nothing anti-Semitic about supporting human rights for all peoples,” said a statement from Rabbi Joseph Berman, a member of the organization’s steering committee.

Last year, Northeastern [placed Students for Justice in Palestine on probation](#) after members of the group staged a walkout at a presentation by Israeli soldiers. Northeastern said the group was placed on probation and ordered to create a “civility statement” because it failed to get a permit ahead of time for its demonstration. The school requires seven days’ notice for such permits.

But the students said they believed they had received permission because administrators acknowledged the planned demonstration beforehand and e-mailed the group to be respectful.

Northeastern said the group cannot be reinstated until the start of 2015, at the earliest.

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