Dear FAU students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends,

Recently I have received expressions of concern about a YouTube video regarding a Florida Atlantic University student group, Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). The video wrongly suggests that FAU shares SJP’s beliefs.

Although FAU allows constitutionally protected free expression, the video’s allegation that FAU tolerates anti-Semitism is false. In both published policies and daily practice, FAU condemns and prohibits any form of unlawful discrimination or harassment that is based on race, color, religion, age, disability, sex, national origin, marital status, veteran status, or sexual orientation. These policies obviously and importantly encompass anti-Semitic discrimination or harassment. Let there be no mistake about it: FAU condemns anti-Semitism.

The unfortunate video fails to recognize a university’s essential function in the “marketplace of ideas” (a phrase used by the Supreme Court to describe the role of public universities in free speech). It ignores the important fact that FAU respects the rights of all persons within our diverse community to express divergent views, including views regarding the Middle East. A peaceful university campus is perhaps the best place for such discussions. But to have real meaning and value, those discussions must allow all points of view – even those that may be offensive or painful to some.

The video also misrepresents the environment on campus. Despite its ugly insinuations, the video never shows – and we have never observed – SJP making any comments about the Jewish faith, those who follow it, or the right of Israel to exist. SJP has strongly criticized Israeli policy -- just as many other groups on campus regularly criticize policies of other governments or even FAU itself. But we have never received any reports that SJP threatened, harassed, or targeted Jewish or Israeli students. (Early media reports that SJP had targeted the rooms of Jewish students when they posted their “eviction notices” were false.) Even student leaders with Hillel, our largest Jewish student organization, have condemned the video as inaccurately portraying our campus atmosphere.

FAU prides itself on being one of the most diverse campuses in America, and we strive to maintain an environment that is both welcoming and open to vigorous intellectual debate. We continuously work to educate the FAU community and address sensitive and controversial subjects. For example, the Office of Multicultural Affairs at FAU holds monthly training sessions for students to address campus civility and differences. The sessions are co-sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League and utilize their curriculum “Campus of Difference.” This training has been ongoing for five years, attended by more than 1,000 students, and required for all of FAU’s resident assistants, orientation leaders and other student leaders.
Our efforts have fostered a welcoming and supportive environment for all students, including those of Jewish heritage. We are proud to have over 3,000 Jewish students attending FAU. Our Hillel Center occupies a prominent space on our main campus and is one of our most active student organizations. Our Chabad Student Center is also growing and vibrant. We recently signed an agreement with the University of Haifa to create a student exchange program for our undergraduate and graduate students interested in studying in Israel. Our Center for Holocaust and Human Rights Education trains educators from around Florida to teach Holocaust and genocide studies. Our Foundation invests more than $2 million of our endowment annually in Israeli bonds. And thanks to the generous support of donors like you, our library houses three major resources dedicated to the study of Jewish culture and history: (i) the Judaica Sound Archives, a center for the collection, preservation and digitization of Judaica audio recordings and over 30,000 musical scores from the 17th century to the present; (ii) a Yiskor Memorial Books special collection of several hundred books written after the Holocaust by survivors, to document the shtetls and their inhabitants that were destroyed by the Nazis; and (iii) our Visual History Archive, which offers online access to approximately 1,100 English-language testimony videos by Holocaust survivors and witnesses, and cataloguing and indexing data of nearly 52,000 videotaped interviews conducted with survivors and witnesses in 56 countries and 32 languages.

Clearly, FAU welcomes and values all of its students. We appreciate the recent statement by Matthew C. Levin, President and CEO of the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County, that the allegations of anti-Semitism against the FAU administration are unfounded. We concur with his assessment that “Jewish life at Florida Atlantic University is alive and well,” and we proudly add that it is alive and well for all other students as well. As an articulate Hillel student noted in a recent West Palm Beach television station news report, withholding financial support from FAU actually harms students — ALL of our students - the most. I thank you for supporting FAU, as your generous gifts make such a difference in the lives of our students.

Sincerely,

Jennifer O'Flannery Anderson, Ph.D. ’05
Vice President for Community Engagement
Executive Director of the FAU Foundation, Inc.