

House to hear antisemitism testimony from college presidents

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Republican lawmakers asked three college presidents to testify at a congressional hearing next week about how they've handled a rise in antisemitic incidents on their campuses since the Israel-Hamas war began Oct. 7.

The presidents of Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology agreed to testify on Tuesday before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, the committee said. The universities have faced public backlash, student demonstrations and alumni revolts since the war began.

The college presidents' testimony in Washington, D.C., could lead to blowback on their campuses, because the stated focus of the hearing does not include a discussion of the Islamophobia that is also roiling colleges.

Faculty and administrators have expressed a broad spectrum of opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at these high-profile campuses, and students and alumni have challenged the administrators' response to protests and their approaches to student safety.

Nick Barley, spokesperson for the House committee, said the presidents were invited, not subpoenaed. Their willingness to face tough questions from the GOP-led committee, whose conservative members tend to be critical of institutions of higher education, comes amid pressure on college leaders to address an escalating climate of discrimination on campuses, particularly at urban and more selective schools where protests and hate crimes have been

The Education Department has said it has received dozens of complaints related to antisemitism, Islamophobia or anti-Arab sentiment since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.

more pervasive, according to active Education Department investigations.

Complaints related to antisemitism, Islamophobia or anti-Arab sentiment are being investigated at New York City schools; Clark County, Nevada, public schools; and Hillsborough County, Florida, public schools, as well as Harvard, Columbia, Cornell, the University of Tampa and others.

Incidents of anti-Muslim harassment are also on the rise, an issue that has become a top concern among many Democrats.

In an attack that is being investigated as a possible hate crime, three college students of Palestinian descent were shot Saturday night in Burlington, Vermont, while they were speaking Arabic. One of the victims, a student at Brown University in Rhode Island, suffered a gunshot wound to the spine and is facing a long recovery, his uncle said Monday.

Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said in November that the Education Department received more complaints related to antisemitic and anti-Muslim harassment in the first month of the war than in all of last year. The department has opened a number of investigations into such incidents, including one at the University of Pennsylvania prompted by a complaint from the Brandeis Center, a Jewish civil rights group, which ac-

cuses administrators of allowing the campus to become a "magnet for anti-Semites."

The hearing next week hints at a renewed focus by Republican leaders on certain aspects of the war. As many Democrats and younger voters find themselves upset with conservatives for failing to speak out about Palestinians' rights, GOP lawmakers are expressing frustration that in their view some colleges have allowed antisemitism to flourish.

In the early days of the conflict, there was a perception among some alumni, faculty and students at a number of selective American colleges — especially the three involved in next Tuesday's hearing — that administrators were slow to condemn Hamas' attack on Israeli civilians Oct. 7. As campus protests escalated and allegations of discrimination grabbed headlines, that perception only worsened, causing some donors to cut off financial support.

The schools now face questions about the importance of free speech on campus and how it measures up against the importance of safety and the colleges' own bottom lines.

The Republican House committee explicitly seeks to highlight how that inner turmoil from college administrators looks from the outside.

"Over the past several weeks, we've

seen countless examples of antisemitic demonstrations on college campuses," Rep. Virginia Foxx, the North Carolina Republican who chairs the committee, said in a statement Tuesday. "Meanwhile, college administrators have largely stood by, allowing horrific rhetoric to fester and grow."

She said the hearing is meant to shine a "spotlight" on campus leaders and demand they "take the appropriate action to stand strong against antisemitism."

In a hearing before the committee last month, Rep. Bobby Scott of Virginia, the ranking Democrat, lauded the Biden administration's efforts to protect college students from all forms of discrimination.

"While the Biden administration has taken an active role in helping institutions protect students, regrettably, many of my colleagues have spent this Congress fueling divisive and baseless culture wars," he said.

Harvard spokesperson Jason Newton said in an email that President Claudine Gay "looks forward to sharing updates and information on the university's work to support the Harvard community and combat antisemitism." He declined to comment further.

Steve Silverman, a spokesperson for the University of Pennsylvania, said in an email that President Liz Magill also was looking forward to the hearing and she "understands the critical importance of fighting antisemitism and other forms of hate on Penn's campus."

Kimberly Allen, a spokesperson for MIT, said in an email that President Sally Kornbluth "welcomes the opportunity to engage with the committee."