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'Conservative thinkers' discouraged from Palestinian class

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A graduate student is ignoring the campus tradition of free speech at the University of California, Berkeley, warning conservative thinkers not to apply for his class on "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance."

Snehal Shingavi, 26, a fifth-year graduate student in English, included in the class description for his undergraduate English class next fall a warning that "conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections."

The course description also says there will be no debate about the right of Palestinians to fight for their own self-determination. After Shingavi's course received national media attention, Berkeley administrators said there was a "failure of oversight" by the English department.

"It is imperative that our classrooms be free of indoctrination - indoctrination is not education," UC Berkeley Chancellor Robert Berdahl said in a statement Thursday. "Classrooms must be places in which an open environment prevails and where students are free to express their views."

Berdahl said the class would be watched to make sure qualified students are not turned away. The course currently is filled with 17 students and a waiting list.

Shingavi, a leader of the campus group Students for Justice in Palestine, defended his position, saying he has a right to limit class themes. His course examines the Palestinian narration of the resistance movement.

"You can have a series of debates about Israel's right to destroy Palestine, but those are not germane to the questions about how Palestinians understand themselves and how they understand resistance," Shingavi said. "I'm not restricting the class, it is merely a warning that the course has certain kinds of themes that are at its core."

But civil liberties advocates find Shingavi's attitude frightening, especially at the birthplace of the Free Speech Movement.

"A professor teaching the African American diaspora cannot say that any student who comes to this course has to accept my views of the struggle of blacks in America," said Thor Halvorssen, executive director of the Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. "You would have Jesse Jackson there leading a candlelight vigil."