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Cramped speech at UC Berkeley; Teacher warns 'conservative thinkers'

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By Tanya Schevitz

At UC Berkeley, birthplace of the Free Speech Movement, a graduate teaching instructor who is a leader in the pro-Palestinian movement on campus has incited a nationwide controversy by trying to control the tenor of discussion in his class.

Snehal Shingavi, 26, a fifth-year graduate student in English, who will be teaching an undergraduate English class on "The Politics and Poetics of Palestinian Resistance," in the fall included in his class description a "warning" that "conservative thinkers are encouraged to seek other sections." Students who are required to take the reading and composition course can choose from a menu of classes covering different themes.

The class description also says that the right of Palestinians to fight for their own self-determination is not up for debate. The course is already full with 17 students and has a waiting list. UC Berkeley Chancellor Robert Berdahl rushed Thursday to declare a "failure of oversight" by the English Department in reviewing course descriptions and said the class will be monitored to ensure that it does not exclude or discourage qualified students from participating.

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

But the issue had attracted a deluge of criticism, bringing Shingavi national attention and a Thursday television appearance on Chris Matthews' "Hardball."

Civil rights and free speech advocates reacted strongly, calling his statements "chilling," and saying that such restrictions do not belong in a university, especially one supported by public funds.

Shingavi, who is a leader in the Students for Justice in Palestine group on campus, said Thursday that instructors have the right to frame the course, limiting the themes of the class to its purpose -- in this case, a literary examination of the Palestinian narration of their 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."

Thor Halvorssen, executive director of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, a Philadelphia civil rights and civil liberties organization, said it is easy to see how "outrageous" the statement is if you replace "conservative" with any other group.

"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," Halvorssen said. "You would have Jesse Jackson there leading a candlelight vigil."

Sophomore Daniel Frankenstein, 20, said that he has problems with the "litmus test" imposed by Shingavi but that Jewish students would have felt excluded from the course anyway.

Shingavi has been at odds with the university administration over its crackdown on Students for Justice in Palestine for the occupation of an academic building April 9. The group was temporarily banned from campus.

"I can gather he is simply trying to get a think tank of people together who all think the same way on an issue. That is not academic freedom," said Frankenstein, a student senator at UC Berkeley.

Shingavi, who is writing his dissertation on pre-independent Indian fiction from 1917 to 1947, said he has included the same phrasing discouraging conservative thinkers in courses he has taught for the past two years without drawing criticism or attention.

The university has been lax about oversight before. Last February, the campus admitted that a student-run male sexuality class -- in which some students visited a strip club -- could have used more supervision.

The ACLU of Northern California, which has publicly denounced UC Berkeley's reaction to the pro-Palestinian sit-in, on Thursday criticized Shingavi's course description as undermining academic freedom.

"It would be interesting for students from all political perspectives to read that poetry," ACLU attorney Margaret Crosby said. "A political speaker can address what he or she chooses, but they have no right to say there should be no hecklers. We all learn more when we are challenged."

UC Regent Ward Connerly said it is an example of the growing intolerance of contrary views on college campuses.

"There are a number of things you can be in the university but conservative is not one of them," he said.