Political scientist Abigail Thernstrom once described the campus as an “island of repression in a sea of freedom.” In one of the great ironies of the postwar period, North American colleges and universities are well on the way to becoming “islands of bigotry in a sea of reason.” As Jews in North America enjoy unprecedented tolerance in most other institutions, the university has become, at best, a signal exception to benign social trends and at worst, the platform from which the forces of antisemitism are staging their return. This chapter will examine the paradox of contemporary campus antisemitism, considering the sources of its resurgence, its manifestations in North America, and the responses available to combat it. In addition, the chapter addresses the definition of antisemitism in the context of the situation on North American campuses.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the long postwar retreat of antisemitism has slowed and may show signs of reversal in North American institutions of higher education. A series of troubling incidents have been conspicuous, not because they reflect a broader atmosphere of hostility towards Jews, but because they have been exceptions in an environment that has been welcoming in other respects of Jewish students. Interestingly, the problem is not that general student or faculty attitudes towards Jews have once again turned negative. A 2007 report of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research indicates that only a negligible three percent of American college professors hold or, more precisely, acknowledge stereotyped and antisemitic. This is the lowest figure for any of the groups considered in the IJCR survey, comparing quite favorably for example, to negative attitudes towards Evangelical Christians (53%), Mormons (33%), Muslims (18%), Atheists (18%) and Catholics (13%).

Nor can we discern any hint of a return to the institutionalized de jure forms of anti-Jewish discrimination that marked North American campuses during the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, some North American
universities have provided numerous accommodations to Jewish students, such as excused absence for religious holidays, kosher dining facilities, chaplaincy services, and Jewish studies courses. By and large, North American Jews no longer face the kind of institutional discrimination in higher education admissions, undergraduate housing, faculty selection, or club membership that they experienced for a significant part of the twentieth century.

Rather, the problem is that disturbing incidents are occurring at universities in which majority attitudes and institutional arrangements appear to be generally favorable towards Jews. Surprisingly, allegations of antisemitism appear to have increased on North American college campuses in recent years, despite these factors, and have included physical assault, stalking, intimidation, vandalism, and various forms of hate speech.²

The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (2006) concluded that “many college campuses continue to experience incidents of antisemitism.” The IJCT (2006) study found that two in five or 40 percent of US Jewish university students had personally experienced or were aware of antisemitism on their campuses. By 2011, the Canadian Parliamentary inquiry similarly observed that “antisemitism is a growing problem on Canadian campuses.” When the poll was repeated in late 2014 as a joint effort through Trinity College (CT) and the Louis D. Brandeis Center, researchers Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar found the percentage of those witnessing or personally experiencing campus antisemitism had increased to 54 percent.³
