

Fresno State launches Jewish Studies club

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By Ron Orozco / The Fresno Bee

A new student organization at Fresno State is hoping to create a deeper understanding of Jewish traditions, culture and religion.

The Jewish Studies Association at Fresno State launched in January with about 30 registered members. The club's faculty adviser, Jill Fields, believes it is the university's first student organization promoting Jewish studies. The university has kept records on student organizations for only 10 years.

The Jewish Studies Association is designed to provide students with opportunities for learning about various Jewish study topics, including history, culture and religion, language and literature in Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, the history of Israel and the contemporary Jewish experience in the United States and worldwide.

An official with the Association of Jewish Studies in New York City, which promotes teaching and research in Jewish studies at universities, says information isn't available on the number of student organizations at U.S. universities. The Association of Jewish Studies has more than 1,800 members, mainly university faculty, graduate students and independent scholars.

Fields, a history professor, says the idea for the group stems from several a course she taught years ago, "The Holocaust in American Culture," which is offered through Fresno State's department of history. She says she was surprised with the classroom response.

"There's such a small Jewish community here, and I found many students were unfamiliar with some Jewish traditions and culture," she says. "I had to explain what they are."

Fields talked with students about forming the cultural organization – open to all students – and received favorable response. She says she just needed the time. Fifteen students are required to register.

So far, student meetings have devoted a lot of attention to planning events that are educational experiences for students and the community.

The club is co-sponsoring a community forum – "Religious Diversity on Campus: A Student Panel" – at 5 p.m. Feb. 24 at the Peters Educational Auditorium in the Student Recreation Center.

The Jewish Studies Association president, Josh Stein, helped organize the forum, which is designed for student leaders to talk about the advantages of religious diversity and problems that may arise from the differences. The forum is modeled after a panel discussion with local religious leaders on "The Healing Power of Religion," held at Fresno State in September. Stein attended the event.

"There's a lot of discussion of religious diversity in the city, but there is tension that isn't always openly discussed, which is challenging," says Stein, a junior who is majoring in philosophy. "It is possible to come to talk at an open forum."

The club also will sponsor a history lecture by Paul Buhle, professor emeritus in history at Brown University, on "Jews and American Comic Books" at 3:30 p.m. March 1 at the Agricultural Sciences building, Room 109. The talk is designed for students and community members to gain an appreciation for comics created by Jewish Americans.

Fields says the Jewish Studies Association is interested in working with the university's Africana Studies and Chicano/Latin Studies groups to hold future events.