CAMPUS SHOWDOWN

The Hillel at the University of Chicago is considered one of the best in the country.

So why was its innovative executive director, and its entire board, fired? The story of a battle over power, money and independence.

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood
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Nearly a month into the very public dispute between the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago and the University of Chicago’s Newberger Hillel Center that resulted in the firing of the Hillel’s executive director and its entire board, questions persist.

The most elemental: What was the melee really about? Money! Abuse of power by one side or the other? Centralized versus localized governance of a Jewish institution? New ways versus old? Or all of the above?

As with most such battles, it depends on who you ask.

What’s clear at this point in the clash that has made headlines in Jewish media from Chicago to Israel is that there will be no going back to the way things stood just a few months ago.

Daniel Libenson, the award-winning former Hillel director, is going ahead with plans—some made long before the current troubles—to launch two new campus organizations, one of which will continue at least some of the programs that won him acclaim as Hillel director.

The Jewish Federation has installed recently retired Hillels of Illinois director, Rabbi Paul Saiger, in Libenson’s old post while it conducts a national search for a successor and a new board. Federation officials promise programs will continue.

Students are caught in the middle, and it may not be until the university resumes classes in the fall that all the implications of the recent events become clear.

While some facts are in dispute, there’s basic agreement about several issues. One is that the ownership model for the Hillel that operates, manages and “owns” the Hillels, an arrangement that began more than 40 years ago, is the Hillel model. The most elemental: What was the mele.

In Chicago, the Jewish United Fund/Jewish Federation controls—some say “owns”—the Hillels, and the actual ownership model for the Hillel is the foundation that operates, manages and “owns” the Hillels. The Hillel’s original parent body. Today, Federation lay leader Harvey Barnett wrote in a March 30 letter to two Newberger Hillel board members, the federation is “the primary institution that operates, manages and ‘owns’ the Hillel campus.

Also in no dispute is the fact that in his six years at the Newberger Hillel, Libenson has made it into one of the best and most innovative in the country and one that attracted many Jewish students that would not ordinarily fit the Hillel mold.

Advocating an individualized approach that used student interns and part-time staff members to bring Jewish experiences to students on campus rather than expecting them to come to a central Jewish address, Libenson hosted Shabbat dinners that regularly drew 200 or more students, and the Hillel racked up the highest percentage of Birthright Israel registration nationally.

A Harvard-educated lawyer and former law professor, Libenson, 40, is widely believed to have transformed a moribund Hillel into a vibrant organization popular with both students and local Jewish community leaders. He was recognized with an Avi Chai Fellowship and a Covenant Foundation Signature Grant, making him one of only three Hillels in the country to receive one.

The current conflict, according to sources, began more than a year ago—and here’s where portions divide into a “he said” versus “she said” issue involving figures that are manipulated in different ways by the different sides and terms whose meanings are unclear.

As early as last spring, federation leaders told Libenson and the Hillel board that they were seeking major budget cuts to reduce the Hillel’s ongoing deficit. Such cuts were necessary in federation-led institutions across the board due to the general economic situation and losses in annual fund-raising, the leaders said.

“They were running six-figure expenses, and our first approach was, how can we raise more money?” John Lowenstein, the new executive director of Hillels of Illinois, the federation organization that oversees all Illinois Hillels, said in a recent phone conversation. “We said, let’s work together to raise money. That requires a partnership and collaboration between federation, which is great at fund-raising, and their lay leaders.

“We were unable to convince them to work closely with us. That approach began the first time I sat down with Dan (Libenson) more than seven months ago. We said, we see areas where we can do things more efficiently. Their response was, we will not cut one dollar,” Lowenstein said.

“Libenson said he was now a competitor in the local Jewish community, that he was her partner in a new approach to Hillel programming and staff.

“‘If they make enormous budget cuts, they are going to have to eliminate staff. They were talking about budget cuts ranging from $120,000 to $150,000 a year, which would have decimated our programs,’ Libenson said in a phone conversation.

“Adam Levine-Weinberg, a graduate student and the Hillel’s treasurer, who was involved in many of the talks with federation leaders, said, “There was the perception that we were wasting money. We were not wasting money; all the money we were spending was going to programs that were very important, keeping the operation running. The cuts could have had a tremendous impact on services.”

Instead, Libenson said he and the board proposed a different way of saving money: getting competitive bids on a number of services, such as building maintenance, janitorial, phone, IT and payroll services. (Most other Hillels around the country use a national Hillel payroll system, for instance, they noted.)

“Asked to come up with $100,000 in budget reductions, the board came up with $155,000, members said, based on competitive bids.

Federation officials turned down the proposal, saying the Hillel had to remain within the federation facilities management system for those services and that the Hillel was actually saving money by using the federation contracts.

Libenson and board members then suggested that the Hillel restructure its relationship with the federation—in essence, declaring independence. In a March 28 letter to federation president Steven Nasatir and chair Skip Schrayer, Hillel board chair Ruth O’Brien and past chair James A. Cherny wrote that “we were grateful for Federation’s ongoing support, but at this time we are unable to fulfill our mission if Federation will not allow us to make budget cuts from the building management and administrative charges it controls.”

“We continue to believe that a solution exists. By restoring the corporate independence of the University of Chicago Hillel...
Signatories came from a number of departments including neurobiology, physics, philosophy, medicine, political science, law and others. The faculty members concluded: “We urge you to reconsider and do the right thing: allow the University of Chicago Hillel to self-govern and concentrate your efforts on initiatives and programs that only you, as a metropolitan organization for Jewish life and concerns, can achieve.”

The exchange of letters continued the next day, with five former Hillel board members writing donors and supporters with what they consider a point-by-point rebuttal of federation figures, charging that, for instance, federation uses “above-market costs for facilities management, infrastructure services, and fringe benefits” and that federation “offered to eliminate $120,000 in expenses, multiple times.”

The members also stated that, unlike other Illinois Hillels, theirs serves graduate and professional students as well as undergraduate students, focusing less on arcane details of their costs. “The proper denominator is the number of students touched by the program, not the number of students on campus,” they wrote.

As the news began to make headlines in Jewish media and became the subject of intense online discussions, both sides have tried to explain their positions, focusing less on arcane details of their service costs and more on root issues of control and autonomy of Jewish institutions.

One of these is Sara Segal Levine-Weinberg, the Hillel’s former vice president – that Libenson and the federation be in charge of the Hillel.

Meanwhile the federation appointed Saiger – recently retired after 22 years as Hillels of Illinois director – to the position of interim Newberger Hillel director. He said he expects to hold the job for 12 to 14 months while a permanent director is found. He said the Hillel is “strong and flourishing” and described the community.

“We find your actions disgraceful and unwelcome in our community. Your having taken these actions without notice on the eve of Shabbat, a week before Passover, and during the weeks when newly-admitted students are touring the building at the time of the lockout of Libenson’s office, according to observers) is a profoundly un-Jewish, indeed unkind, action...” the faculty members wrote.

They continued: “The disregard for our community that you showed in treating our colleagues so disrespectfully and in the timing and manner of your actions in terminating Mr. Libenson’s employment after six years of award-winning and dedicated service to our community shocks the conscience and demonstrates your total lack of regard for the values of the University of Chicago, and for the humanity of the members of our community.”

Libenson and the board members did not expect to be fired, Segal Loevy said. “We never sought to be a campaign to reach Hillel. It’s hard to expect these Hillels to be great at everything and at fund-raising too,” he said. He said he finds the current situation “incredibly sad” for the students. “There are some students who are very upset,” he said. “If the result is it changes their upward trajectory when it comes to engagement in Jewish life, that is very sad.”

Nasatir, the federation president, said he doesn’t want to get into conflict and name-calling because “what’s really important here, what really matters is support for programs on college campuses. We are so committed – we are committed to serve and develop Jewish leadership on campuses,” he said in a recent phone conversation. “At the University of Chicago, we continue to be very committed to working with Jewish students on campus” through Saiger and the Hillel staff, which has been retained.

He said, however, that he and other federation officials are “hurt” on a number of levels. “A dichotomy gets set up that this is a battle of innovation versus the archaic establishment,” he said. “That hurts, and it is easy and glib to say that.” Federation programs may not be “creative,” he said, but they provide food for poor Jews, bring Israel Studies programs to a number of campuses, engage teens and perform a multitude of other needed services.

“There isn’t a federation in the country that has developed an Israel Studies program, and we have it at several Hillels, including at the University of Chicago, he said. “People talk

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John Lowenstein, director, Hillels of Illinois

about a lack of creativity, and yet no other federation in the country has done that.”

Nasatir and other federation officials have said they know the conflict has made the federation look bad in some sectors of the community, but that wouldn’t be the case if all the facts were known.

A federation official said many are portraying the conflict as a David and Goliath scenario, which is inaccurate, he said. “It’s very painful,” Aaron Cohen, the federation’s vice president of communications, said. “We’re hurt. The federation has invested enormously in trying to avoid the very situation that was forced on us. Every opportunity that could be given was given, and it hurts a lot.”

Libenson, meanwhile, took his case and his thoughts to the Israeli public – at least the English-speaking sector – with an article in the newspaper Ha’aretz headlined “U.S. Judaism is going through its iPod stage.”

He wrote: “People have asked me why this split happened. The simple answer is that there was a disagreement over where to cut the budget to compensate for the federation’s declining fortunes. Should we cut administration and overhead, as the Hillel board wanted, or should we cut the student programs, as the federation wanted?”

He then went on to elaborate a “deeper answer” that can be partially found in a book called “The Innovator’s Dilemma” and in the notion of “disruptive innovations” – innovations that constitute true paradigm shifts (which) almost always come from new players in a market and not from a market’s dominant companies. “Such a paradigm shift occurred when the iPod came out and began displacing the iPod, he wrote.

Today, he contends, there is such a shift occurring within the American Jewish world. “It has become quite clear that the old network of American Jewish institutions … are in an advanced state of decay,” he wrote, while calling for a “disruptive innovation” in American Jewish life.

The article plays into the view of some federation leaders that Libenson is framing the conflict as being between the discontents of the Jewish world and the innovators, but Libenson said that, while he does see that conflict at work in the American Jewish world, his intention was never to disrupt the functioning of the Newberger Hillel.

“There was never anything in our minds other than wanting to build a great student program,” he said, noting its many successes, including attracting some 25 percent of the university’s Jewish population to its monthly Shabbat dinners.

Now Libenson is going forward with two new projects, one of which predates the conflict. That is the Institute for the Next Jewish Future, described as a “network of laboratory communities, a think tank and an education center dedicated to accelerating the discovery of a more resonant and compelling Judaism for the 21st century.”

That program, he said, will be independent of the university and is designed to develop Jewish innovators. It was incorporated as a not-for-profit more than a year ago, Libenson said.

Another program, jUChicago, will operate more like a Hillel. “It will carry on many of the most successful projects we were doing at Hillel, engaging students who most likely would not become engaged in Jewish life on their own,” Libenson said. The new organization will make extensive use of student interns to engage their peers, just as Libenson’s Hillel program did.

The funding will come from private donors, Libenson said. He has already registered the new organization as an official religious life group at the university and is now looking into securing a space for it.

The new organization “has the backing of the entire board, including the student members,” Segal Loevy said. “We have continued to meet in each other’s homes. We are very excited about the possibilities that lie ahead of us and the opportunity to work without some of the budgetary constraints placed upon us by the federation,” she said while also expressing appreciation for the federation’s generosity in previous years.

As for the students impacted by the changes, both Saiger and Levine-Weinberg agree that they are split into several groups, with a range of emotions. “Some students decided they were going to adapt to the new reality, doing their best as if nothing happened. Others are very upset about the changes.”

Levine-Weinberg predicts that “Dan’s program will be very popular, because over the past six years, he has built a very good reputation on campus. But many will still be involved with Hillel and Dan will be perfectly happy with students being involved with both organizations.”

It remains to be seen – and probably won’t be seen until the university resumes classes in the fall – whether having two major Jewish student organizations on one campus will lead to a duplication of precious resources or an increase in the vibrancy of Jewish life on campus. Stay tuned.

“’I’m disappointed that we couldn’t have a further dialogue to try to work this through without there being such a public breach, which I feel was caused by federation cutting off the conversation. We were certainly willing to try to work with federation on these issues.”

James Cherney, former board chair, University of Chicago Hillel

“We hoped it wouldn’t happen. We requested that we sit down with a mediator and work through together, how we might reach an amicable separation and the ability to be independent with some middle ground. We were really quite shocked to be fired.”

Sara Segal Loevy, University of Chicago Hillel’s former vice president for development

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Steven Nasatir, president of the Jewish Federation

Hillel

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