

Pursuing the undergraduate dream in America

More and more Israeli students are interested, despite the obstacles

By **Danna Harman**

Until a decade or two ago, only a handful of Israelis even considered flying to the U.S. for their undergraduate college years. It seemed out of reach, perhaps: something for “anglos” whose parents may have gone to college in the States before them, or for the very wealthy who could afford the tens of thousands of dollars in annual tuition fees.

Or maybe, it just all seemed too complicated – what with the SATs and TOEFLs, the recommendations, personal essays, student visas and financial aid requests – not to mention the anxiety about being a few years older than the typical American freshman. Staying home and going to Hebrew University suddenly might

have felt all that much more simple.

So, while Israelis have long sojourned in the U.S. to pursue graduate degrees – there are currently over 2200 Israelis doing so, according to official statistics – getting a BA in the U.S. was never nearly as popular.

However, over the past five years, according to EducationUSA, a counseling and guidance center authorized by the U.S. government to advise students on higher education in the U.S., the situation has been changing.

Today, says Arona Maskil, director of the EducationUSA's Israel center, which works under the auspices of U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv, some 70-100 Israelis from diverse backgrounds head off to U.S. colleges every year – many of them with finan-



Tomer Appelbaum

Israelis at an undergraduate fair in Tel Aviv last week.

cial aid packages. The center here, she says, gets about 25,000 requests for information or help a year, and their website gets some 4,000 hits a month – a growing num-

ber of these from students interested in undergraduate tracks.

Part of the reason for this increase in numbers goes back to the colleges

themselves, which, keen on “diverse” student bodies, have been investing more in reaching out to prospective international students. Hand in hand with this trend, a whole industry has sprouted up – in Israel, as elsewhere around the world – of official bodies like EducationUSA and private, for-profit outfits designed to help foreign students navigate their way through the undergraduate admissions process.

It is in this context that EducationUSA, which has long been holding information fairs for Israelis interested in attending U.S. graduate business schools, held its first-ever undergraduate fair in Israel on Thursday, at the Tel Aviv Carlton Hotel.

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The pilot event, which was free and came complete with informational sessions, booths of different colleges, and an impressive outlay of desserts, attracted over 600 youngsters.

There were soldiers in uniform who came down from the north or up from the Negev; orthodox young women from Jerusalem, and Arabs from Nazareth and Jaffa. There were dorky tenth graders, ahead of the game, and those closer to 30 than 20, wondering if it was still possible to give it a go.

“Does everyone have to take the TOEFL?” a redhead from Jerusalem over at the Princeton booth wants to know. “How are our Bagrut grades weighed against SAT scores?” a kid in braces asks the Brown representative. “I want to go to medical school, is that possible to do as an undergraduate?” a curly haired young man asks the friendly Harvard alum gamely fielding questions. “And what about financial aid?” they all demand over and over again at all the booths, trying to understand how it all works.

“Should I apply while I’m in the army, or wait until I am done?” a captain in the navy wonders. “I am very good at science but don’t speak English,” a Russian immigrant admits, his question trailing off. “Do the universities provide health care?” comes an original question out of left field. “What does liberal arts mean?” comes another. Guy Amdur, a 23-year old from Yeshuv Matan, is set on studying physics – at Harvard. “My parents barely know English,” he says, “but I have known for a long time that I want this experience and worked all through high school with this in mind.” Amdur spent months on his personal essay – about a rescue mission

he carried out as part of his army service in an elite unit – and scored close to perfect SAT scores. “I will be disappointed if I don’t get in,” he admits. “But sure, that too can happen. It happens a lot.” Israelis are very “brand oriented,” says Maskil, watching as the fair attendees crowd around the MIT and Harvard booths, passing by the Foothill-De Anza Community College or the Florida Institute of Technology.

Hilla Yerushalmy, EducationUSA's senior educational advisor, says that up until last year, the vast majority of Israelis applied only to the very top Ivy league schools. But there seems to be a shift taking place, she says, with some 40 percent of the Israelis now applying to a wide range of institutions, from Hunter College to Arizona State, Pratt Institute, Duke, Cornell and Vassar.

“We are trying to encourage students to look at all sorts of schools, including community colleges, as an alternative,” says Maskil. She explains that, in many cases, students might spend two years at a community college, and then switch over to a more “prestigious” college for the last two. “This is a great option for those who might not have such great Bagrut, or want to cut costs, as community colleges are less expensive. It’s a good way to get started in the US system.”

Dor Goldman, a young Israeli who went to Loyola Marymount, and is the first and only one in his family to have gone to school in the U.S., was staffing that college’s booth at the Thursday fair. “I know a lot of Israelis have not heard of us,” he says. “I myself just sort of just stumbled on it. But I cannot recommend the experience there enough.” The college is small; the classes were intimate; the professors were accessible; the Jewish community was warm – and the California beach was amazing. The experience was a life changer, he concludes: “I lived the dream.”