

263. University administrations should not entertain complaints about a professor's race or ethnicity

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<http://thechronicleherald.ca/opinion/1570503-opinion-msvu-prof-challenged-on-colour-of-her-skin-not-content-of-her-course>

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In 1964, university people wondered whether professors who practiced religion were capable of researching or teaching it. After all, a religious believer would lack the distance and dispassion needed to see the topic clearly.

“Is understanding religion compatible with believing” was the question the philosophers and social scientists debated. If it isn't, departments of religious studies would do well to hire only atheists.

Nowadays, it's the opposite: university people wonder whether only members of the group may write about or teach what the group is up to, for only a group member could truly know what it's like to be on the inside.

Rather than distance and dispassion, then, what academics need in order to do their jobs well, it seems, is pedigree or authenticity.

And so Mount Saint Vincent University is coming under fire for scheduling a professor who is not indigenous to teach a course this fall on the residential schools. (See “University under scrutiny over residential schools course taught by white prof,” May 11, <http://thechronicleherald.ca/canada/1569974-university-under-scrutiny-over-residential-schools-course-taught-by-white-prof>.)

MSVU History professor Martha Walls would seem to be ideal for the course, Selected Topics in North American History: Residential Schools. Dr Walls is well published in First Nations culture and history and she is reputed to be a fine teacher. As well, she is happy to bring her expertise outside the academy, as, for instance, when she entered the debate on the side of removing the statue of Edward Cornwallis.

Dr Walls is ideal for the course except, in the opinion of some, for her race or ethnicity.

Now one would think that administrators at Mount Saint Vincent would respond to complaints about the fitness of Dr Walls to teach in her area by saying just what I said above, that Dr Walls is a scholar of First Nations history and well qualified to teach the course, and that's that. But that is not what they have done.

Instead, according to Vice-President Academic Elizabeth Church, the Mount has called indigenous faculty and staff and Dr Walls to meet “to determine a way forward.”

Having such a meeting sets a terrible precedent and should be roundly condemned by all people concerned about higher education. It implicitly disparages the academic ideals of independent inquiry and teaching, and specifically demeans Dr Walls. A scholar or teacher's

competence is to be determined by the quality of her scholarship and teaching, not by academically irrelevant matters such as race or ethnicity.

Moreover, having this meeting expresses disdain for the procedures by which academics create and assign courses.

Universities are said to be collegial institutions, and a large part of what is meant by that is that the professors themselves decide what courses are to be taught and who is to teach them. The professors in community are best positioned to understand what the students need in their education and who is able to help them meet their needs.

Typically, professors in a department or other academic unit get together to work out what courses will be taught and who will teach them. It's a collaborate endeavor, one that serves students well by ensuring that their teachers are both committed to the course and knowledgeable.

Calling a meeting to "determine a way forward" when a department's decision to assign a course to a particular professor has been criticized on non-academic grounds is tantamount to abandoning collegiality. It undercuts the History department's prerogative to implement its curriculum. It signals that administrative priorities may override academic ones.

There were other complaints made about assigning Dr Walls the course. One was that having a non-indigenous scholar teach about the residential schools silences indigenous voices. Another was that only indigenous people have the right to speak about the experiences of indigenous people. A third was that it harms the process of reconciliation between settlers and First Nations.

It's far from clear that any of the three complaints is valid. Certainly, for instance, no voices are silenced by a qualified scholar teaching a course. Students and others are free to say what they wish and to contribute to the discussion however they desire.

Nonetheless, the point I'd make here is that none of these complaints is of significance in an academic context. They are about politics or culture, not about inquiry or learning. If universities are to be places of academic excellence, people must inquire into whatever they want and draw their own conclusions whether they have a right to do so or not and whether their inquiring fits anyone's political agenda or not.

Mount Saint Vincent University, in choosing to consult to find a way forward, has chosen to cast aspersions on the scholarship and teaching of one of its professors and to abandon the collegial procedures by which students and the academic mission are best served.