

University under scrutiny over residential schools course taught by white prof

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HALIFAX — A Halifax university is under fire for assigning a course about Canada's residential schools to a non-Indigenous professor, something activists say undermines reconciliation efforts.

Mount Saint Vincent University is expected to offer the course, Selected Topics in North American History: Residential Schools, this fall.

The professor slated to teach the course has an expertise in Atlantic Canadian First Nations history, with a specialization in the historical experiences of 20th century Indigenous women, according to the school's website.

Yet the decision to assign a "settler scholar" to teach the course has been slammed on social media as a kind of historical appropriation and reinforcement of the systemic oppression of First Nations.

Critics say only Indigenous people have the lived experience to understand the complex and cumulative ways they've been discriminated against, and that they should teach their own history.

"Part of reconciliation is making space for Indigenous faculty members at universities and Indigenous knowledge perspectives," Patti Doyle-Bedwell, a Mi'kmaq woman and Dalhousie University professor, said on Friday.

"We're talking about indigenizing the academy."

The university has called for a meeting next week between Indigenous faculty and staff and the professor assigned to the course to determine a way forward.

"These are issues facing all universities in Canada," said Elizabeth Church, the Mount's vice-president academic.

"What we've tried to do is listen to the different perspectives and really try to understand how to move forward in a way that is respectful and thoughtful."

The university has been actively recruiting Indigenous academics, she said, with a new faculty member recently hired and the search for another ongoing.

"It's a very complex issue and we're really looking at what it means to have expertise in the topic and bringing in the perspectives that need to be there," Church said.

Martha Walls, the professor assigned to the course, said in an email that she takes the "important concerns aired over Facebook extremely seriously."

But despite the outcry on social media, Sherry Pictou, a professor at the university who is Mi'kmaq, is speaking out in support of Walls.

Pictou said she has "full confidence" in her colleague both as a historian and an ally to the Indigenous community.

She said the work of decolonizing "cannot fall just on the backs and labour of other Indigenous academics."

"I am proud to be working at the Mount and have had much support in ensuring that I am not overly tasked with all Indigenous related issues as so many Indigenous professors are," Pictou said in an email.

"Though I bring an Indigenous feminist lens to the courses I teach, they are not all Indigenous specific and I would be very concerned if I were prevented from teaching those courses."

She said the Mount is working on ways to offer Indigenous-specific courses as well as encouraging non-Indigenous faculty to responsibly implement Indigenous-related curriculum across the disciplines.

Pictou added that as much as Indigenous faculty members can be subject to criticism for not living up to "privileged non-Indigenous academic standards," this debate has shown her that Indigenous scholars can also come under fire for not living up to perceptions of "genuine indigeneity."

Professor Sandra Muse Isaacs, a Cherokee woman originally from the U.S. who teaches at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, said the idea of a non-Indigenous Canadian teaching a course on residential schools stifles Indigenous voices.

"It's unfair because it's not allowing the voices of those people who are directly impacted by the residential school experience to be the one speaking," she said. "They've already had their voices muted and taken away from them during their experience in those schools."

Rebecca Thomas, a Mi'kmaq community activist and former Halifax poet laureate, said part of reconciliation is allowing Indigenous Peoples a voice.

"There is this perpetuation that non-Indigenous people have the right and expertise to speak on Indigenous topics when in reality the lived experience of what it's like to be a product of these systems within Canada, there's no voice better than first voice."

More than 150,000 First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children were taken from their families — often by force — to attend government residential schools, according to findings by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The commission heard testimony from roughly 7,000 survivors, including graphic details of rampant sexual and physical abuse at the schools, and found at least 6,000 Indigenous children died from malnutrition, disease and widespread abuse.