

Stevenson stripped of emeritus status

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Scott Henderson. A senate meeting at Brock University was held to discuss the Emeritus status of former Brock professor Garth Stevenson for racially charged tweets on Twitter. - Julie Jocsak , The St. Catharines Standard



Brock University president Gervan Fearon looks on during a senate meeting at the university Wednesday. The senate decided to remove the professor emeritus status of Dr. Gavin Stevenson, over social media posts he made last week. - Julie Jocsak , The St. Catharines Standard



The Brock University senate met on Wednesday to discuss the Professor Emeritus status of former professor Garth Stevenson. - Julie Jocsak , The St. Catharines Standard



Jens Coorsen speaks during a senate meeting at Brock University to discuss the Emeritus status of former professor Garth Stevenson. - Julie Jocsak , The St. Catharines Standard

Brock University has stripped a retired political science professor of his status as a professor emeritus, after he posted "intemperate and offensive" comments on social media deriding Indigenous peoples.

During a special meeting of the university's senate governance committee on Wednesday, members voted to withdraw the title after Garth Stevenson attacked Indigenous Canadians in numerous posts on social media websites.

In one post — referring to a Victoria B.C. decision to relocate a statue of Sir John A. MacDonald away from city hall — Stevenson described Indigenous people as "sniveling aboriginals who probably never did a day's work in their lives."

In another post, he wrote "to hell with your cleansing, blessing and healing. The so-called First Nations seem to be taking over this country and it will soon be unfit for civilized people to live in."

Brock senate chair Scott Henderson said he learned about the "multiple appalling tweets and Facebook postings" late Thursday.

"There was an immediate discussion about how we should deal with this issue given the fact that Mr. Stevenson was retired from Brock and the horrific comments he was making were on social media platforms not directly associated with or controlled by the university."

Brock president Gervan Fearon issued a statement Friday morning, condemning Stevenson's comments and requesting that the university's senate governance committee withdraw Stevenson's professor emeritus status. Fearon's request was unanimously approved.

"The issue is not one related to free speech as we are in no position to censor Mr. Stevenson's comments," Henderson said. "As an academic community, Brock encourages a diversity of opinion, but we also expect thoughtful, reasonable debate."

In an email sent to The Standard and CBC last week, Stevenson called the emeritus status a "meaningless title."

"Although it might deprive me of the right to borrow books from their library, I am sure I can live without that," he wrote.

But contacted following the senate governance committee's decision on Wednesday, Stevenson said the university's decision to withdraw his emeritus status was not justified.

"I am always suspicious of unanimous votes by any body of people on any issue, because it suggests that at least some of them were following the crowd rather than thinking for themselves," he wrote in an email.

Stevenson also apologized for the offensive social media posts.

"While my language was intemperate and offensive and I apologize for it, I think the campaign to destroy the reputation of Sir John A. Macdonald is entirely unjustified and that was the point that I was trying to make," he wrote.

Stevenson also referred to a letter written by Mark Mercer — a professor at St. Mary's University in Halifax and president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship — urging Brock University's president to reconsider.

He said Mercer's letter "presents the arguments against Brock's action more eloquently than I could."

"By officially characterizing Dr. Stevenson's comments as 'inflammatory' and 'abhorrent,' and criticizing them as appalling and a threat to Brock's commitment to inclusion and respect, Brock University has signalled that certain views on important topics may not be spoken. A university, though, should encourage a full range of opinion on all subjects," Mercer wrote.

"By removing Dr. Stevenson's emeritus status and ruling his views incompatible with Brock policy, Brock University makes it harder for members of the university to believe that they are free to speak their minds."

But during the senate committee meeting, Brock's interim provost and vice-president academic Thomas Dunk, also reiterated that the decision was not a reflection on freedom of speech.

"Nothing we do today is going to stop Garth Stevenson from saying whatever he wishes to say in whatever venue he wishes to say it," Dunk said. "But it is again a way of asserting that we no longer wish to have a mutual relationship with Garth Stevenson."

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