

Brock condemnation of professor 'wrongheaded'

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Mark Mercer Special to The St. Catharines Standard

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Brock University recently condemned statements made by Garth Stevenson, a retired political science professor, and is poised to revoke Dr. Stevenson's professor emeritus status.

Whatever one thinks about what Dr. Stevenson said or how he said it, Brock's reaction is profoundly wrongheaded.

There are three grounds on which Brock's actions can be criticized. First, revoking an honour for academic achievement on irrelevant grounds devalues academic achievement. Second, when a university takes a stand on matters of public interest, it encourages conformity in viewpoint among its professors and students. Third, when a university encourages conformity in viewpoint, the public is right to be sceptical of research coming from that university.

Emeritus status is conferred in recognition of a retiring professor's achievements as a teacher and researcher. Dr. Stevenson had written numerous books and articles, many of which are still discussed in classes and professional journals across Canada. On academic grounds, he was clearly deserving of the honour his colleagues bestowed on him when he retired. Since a professor's political or social opinions are irrelevant when the awarding of the title "Professor Emeritus" is considered, they cannot be relevant retroactively.

If Brock revokes Dr. Stevenson's emeritus status, it will be telling the world that academic achievement is not worth honouring just for its own sake.

Dr. Stevenson made known through social media his views and feelings regarding the removal of a statue of Sir John A. Macdonald

and of those people, including First Nations Canadians, who advocated removing the statue. We can all agree, though, that whether the statue should have been removed and the reasons why and why not are matters of public interest, as is the place of First Nations within Canada.

Brock University has a responsibility to promote candid and open discussion of matters of public interest. Certainly its professors should be free to comment on matters of public interest as they see fit, even intemperately, without putting their official university positions at risk.

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. 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 community to believe they are free to speak their minds.

Brock's actions will also diminish the respect the public has for work on controversial issues coming from the university. Censuring Dr. Stevenson for what he said tends to create a party line on the topics he raised. If members of the general public believe that Brock has a party line on some issue, they will suspect that Brock professors and students must hold to the approved views rather than to their evaluation of the evidence.

It's only because people think that professors are free to follow the evidence wherever it leads that they pay attention to university research. Academic freedom to draw one's own conclusions is why people trust universities more than, say, pharmaceutical companies. Brock's actions will cause people to think that Brock research is partisan, meant to get a job done rather than to speak the truth.

One might respond to my criticisms that the actions of Brock University are in response to the obnoxious, offensive, and vulgar way in which Dr. Stevenson expressed his views.

A reading of Brock's official statements, though, show them to be as much about the content of what Dr. Stevenson said as the manner. Nonetheless, they do take exception to the vitriol in the expression.

But if Brock wishes to maintain itself as a place of free expression, then it should refrain from condemning how people speak their minds just as it should refrain from condemning what they say. Ruling a manner of speech out of bounds can make people just as afraid to speak as ruling certain views out of bounds can.

Does this mean that Dr. Stevenson should not be criticized, neither for his views nor for his way of expressing them? No, not at all. All of us are or should be free to criticize either the views or their expression. But Brock University, the institution itself, would do best not to comment. Only then might it function as a space in which people generally may engage in critical discussion among themselves.

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