

Mobbing and Wokeism: Experience and Analysis

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Abstract

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Introduction

On December 20, 2021, I was fired from Mount Royal University (MRU), after 13 years of a good teaching record, an impressive research agenda, and organizing a Critical Thinking Series that encouraged the rational examination of contentious topics.¹ The actual firing episode created a terrible situation by luring me into a classroom after hours without union representation. When I fled the scene, I was followed back to my office by a crowd of administrators and two security guards. The result was feelings of terrorization to the point where I called 9-1-1. In hindsight, this appeared to be a deliberate attempt to portray me as a dangerous person who needed to be immediately removed from MRU for the “safety” of others (Widdowson, 2023).

The firing was the culmination of a mobbing that had been unfolding since 2016. In the whole process, MRU did not protect me; administrators, in fact, sided with the mobbers, even promoting them and encouraging their complaints against me. This was directly linked to the development of wokeism at MRU (to be defined and discussed below). By 2020, all leaders at MRU, including the union executive, had been captured by this reactionary, anti-Enlightenment force. Wokeism intensified with the hiring of Gabrielle Lindstrom in 2018. Lindstrom was a desired indigenization asset, and angrily opposed any person questioning this initiative. And because MRU had declared that indigenous “ways of knowing” should be “respected” and “valued” in its 2016 Indigenous

¹ The events of the Critical Thinking Series can be found on the Rational Space Network’s YouTube Channel <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLm9DMljz4xkUfcP5XzzwdcPx3sff1aG7L> [accessed July 21, 2024]. See also, “Episode 15: Rational Space and the Critical Thinking Series,” WokeAcademy.Info <https://wokeacademy.info/episode-15-rational-space-and-the-critical-thinking-series/> [accessed July 21, 2024].

Strategic Plan (Mount Royal University, 2016), Lindstrom was encouraged in her belief that criticism of indigenization, or even asking questions about it, was “racist and discriminatory” (Widdowson, 2022a).

As will be shown below, the woke takeover of the academy is disturbing for a number of reasons. One of the most significant is that it is perfectly suited to mobbing. It is a kind of groupthink that is common in mobbing situations, but it also encourages coercive tactics to accept its highly improbable claims. Even worse, it sells this coercion as an act of compassion. This means that faculty members, students and administrators who normally might be opposed to the autocratic processes that facilitate mobbing campaigns, will be more inclined to accept these actions. They are under the mistaken belief that totalitarian woke maneuvers constitute kindness, and will empower the oppressed.

What is Mobbing?

The word mobbing became a subject of academic study with the work of Heinz Leymann (Leymann, 1990). Writing in the 1980s, Leymann differentiated mobbing from bullying, as it was not the act of an individual. Instead, Leymann defined it as the “systematic harassment of a single person by a larger group.”² Leymann based his concept of mobbing on the work of Konrad Lorenz and his study of animals (Westhues, n.d.) Lorenz noticed the phenomenon in animals where they would suddenly turn on one of their members, chasing it from the group. Lorenz maintained that this was due to an instinct that made the collective see the target as a danger to its survival. Following Lorenz, Leymann noticed this behaviour in human societies. For the purposes of this paper, we are focusing on these observations with respect to workplaces. In these settings, mobbing unfolds as “collective revulsion and aggression, the fanatic ganging up of a bunch of people on a despised workmate, whom they seek to disgrace, punish, and in the long run eliminate” (Westhues, 2021).

In this context, the mobbers are intent on “making the target’s life a burden, [and] cutting him or her out of the circle of respectability” (Westhues, 2020). This is often connected to “maintaining power” in an attempt to “protect the status quo,” and can occur even when the particular agendas of different mobbers don’t align (Twale and DeLuca, 2008). “Negative communication” is used to frame the target as someone who threatens the organization, and the worker becomes labelled as “a troublemaker,” “mentally ill,” “a bully,” or having a “difficult personality.” The “bully” designation is particularly important because it justifies the mobbing as “mock justice, making it possible to involve individuals in the campaign who would otherwise stay on the sidelines” (Seguin, 2016).

Kenneth Westhues, one of the foremost Canadian experts on workplace mobbing, maintains that there are both systemic institutional factors and particular personal characteristics pertaining to the target that contribute to the possibility of mobbing (Westhues, 2020). Systemic characteristics include shrinking resources and superiors who are inclined to use punishment. Particular

² <https://www.leymann.se/English/frame.html> [accessed July 20, 2024].

characteristics are those that distinguish the target from the rest of the group. This includes things like a person having an accent, being a whistleblower, or achieving more than one's peers. Interestingly, universities are one of the workplaces most prone to mobbing, and Eve Seguin even maintains that they are "a type of organization that encourages mobbing." This is because "[t]he organizational culture of universities prohibits anyone from admitting, or even thinking, that an employee could be targeted by a group of other employees." Universities are assumed to pursue high intellectual ideals, and not be involved in the usual Machiavellian struggles for power and resources found in other institutions. This leads to the assumption that mobbing campaigns are the result of personality conflicts, where the parties are equally responsible for what has transpired. It also results in a tendency "to blame the target's personality for allegedly provoking or exacerbating the conflict" (Seguin, 2016).

University workplaces also are "often larger, less well-defined, less centralised and significantly less oriented towards specific actions than groups formed for the purpose of policy-making," and "they operate under conditions of less stress, urgency, risk and danger." (Pace, 2024). This often results in irrational beliefs becoming "much deeper, more complex, and more incorrigible – more in the nature of moral, political and aesthetic values." Counterintuitively, there is a strange intellectual conformity in academia. Mechanisms encourage conventionalism in academic disciplines, and hiring and recruitment processes result in the cultivation of "in groups" As a result, dissent tends to be regarded with suspicion. Academic life is also prone to incubating hostility because the ideas of scholars are connected to their identities, and so a criticism of ideas can be easily interpreted as an attack on a person. Melvin D. Williams has suggested that pathologies are more likely to manifest themselves "among those who undergo the extensive education required to enter academia, and how the insecurities involved can easily translate into power and inferiority complexes when some gain positions of authority" (Pace, 2024). Ian Pace asserts that Westhues points out that these dynamics are particularly acute when there is a disdain for academic freedom in an institution.

How is Mobbing Related to Wokeism?

Westhues' reference to a disdain for academic freedom in some universities is related to two factors that he claims increase the likelihood of mobbing: "[b]elonging to a discipline with ambiguous standards and objectives, especially those (like music or literature) most affected by postmodern scholarship" and "[p]ublicly dissenting from politically correct ideas (meaning those held sacred by campus elites)" (Westhues, 2006, pp. 18-19). This means that the quality of a professor's work is difficult to evaluate on the basis of its rigour, quality or innovativeness, making it easier for power to be deployed in a partisan manner. And if the university itself supports particular politically correct ideas, professors who pursue evidence-based arguments that dissent from this orthodoxy could be perceived as undermining the university's mission. This would single them out, making them more likely to be the target of a mobbing attempt (Becker, 2023).

The identification of postmodern scholarship as a factor in mobbing is particularly relevant to the arguments in this paper. Westhues spelled out this relevance in a 2013 essay where he notes that

about half of the mobbing cases that he has studied have involved a conflict between “two modes of discourse” – modern and postmodern (Westhues, 2013). Modern discourse came out of The Enlightenment, and strives for dispassionate rationality and objectivity in the attempt to pursue a universal truth. Postmodern discourse, on the other hand, is “the relativist, constructivist, anti-scientific mentality, the wholesale inversion of Enlightenment values, that has arisen since the 1960s, similar in some ways to traditional, premodern mentalities.”

The ascendancy of postmodernism in the academy is directly related to the phenomenon that has been identified as wokeism. Although the term wokeism is often perceived as a pejorative, it is the most recognized descriptive term for the phenomenon we are seeing, not only in academe, but throughout the Anglosphere, when identity politics becomes totalitarian. Identity politics, which maintains that the affirmation of how oppressed groups perceive themselves enables them to become empowered and overcome their oppression, used to be one position among many in universities. Now it has become dominant and there are institutional demands that everyone accept its assumptions. So, when a member of an oppressed group claims to be something that they are not - a sperm-producing individual alleging that they are a woman, for example - and the assertion is contested, the dissident is accused of being in favour of the oppression of a trans person. While the label of transphobia can be intimidating, this is nothing compared to the fact that a refusal to use the pronouns she/her risks being subjected to an investigation, receiving discipline and then having a totalitarian order imposed to attend things like a “Respect in the Workplace” program followed by an “Anti-discrimination” workshop.³

This institution-sanctioned demand that the subjective beliefs of groups perceived to be oppressed be affirmed or “reified”⁴ has occurred in two stages; the first is described above by Westhues when postmodernism gained a foothold in universities in the 1960s. The rejection of the pursuit of a universal truth that this entailed allowed identity politics to be accepted in a number of areas of the university such as black studies, women’s studies, queer studies, and disability studies. This corruption of the academic mission in pockets of the academy then, in a second stage, formed the basis of arguments for various affirmative action/targeting/diversity initiatives that began to become prominent in the 2000s. Wokeism was needed to justify the lowering of standards required to hire on the basis of identity categories.

³ This is what I was ordered to do for satirizing the concept of “misgendering fatigue” and the LGBTQ initialism. Disciplinary letter from Elizabeth Evans to Frances Widdowson, May 13, 2021, <https://wokeacademy.info/provost-elizabeth-evans-disciplinary-letter/> [accessed July 21, 2024]. Interestingly, MRU made no effort to schedule this re-education and so I was never able to find out how I could reorient my behaviour in the workplace.

⁴ This is a term used to describe wokeism. “Reified” means “making real,” which amounts to forcing people to pretend that subjective beliefs are objective truths. For a discussion see “Reified Postmodernism,” August 30, 2023, <https://www.berfrois.com/2022/08/reified-postmodernism/> [accessed July 21, 2024].

In about 2014, wokeism began to take over the machinery of universities with various types of equity, diversity, and inclusion offices and initiatives. I noticed this personally in the fall of 2014 when we were told that MRU would be “indigenized.” This initiative mandated that indigenous “ways of knowing” be “respected” and “valued” (Mount Royal University, 2016). Because my work asserted that these “ways of knowing” were not evidence-based, and actually were hostile to scientific and scholarly methods, many woke professors and students began to express anger about the questions that I asked in meetings and events. A few years later, the woke element would be openly questioning how I could be a professor at MRU when we had an official policy of indigenization.

The most disturbing aspect of the woke takeover of universities, however, is how the unions were captured. I became aware of this, again in 2014, when my union invited the Canadian Association of University Teachers to give a workshop on equity.⁵ This workshop encouraged faculty members to put territorial land acknowledgements on their syllabi and advocated for diversity in hiring. At the time, I thought it was strange that the union representing all faculty associations would support political positions that had the potential to undermine academic freedom. By unions taking a position on territorial land acknowledgements, for example, pressure to conform to a politically correct idea was placed on skeptical professors.

By 2019, the Mount Royal Faculty Association (MRFA) became completely captured by wokeism and began to actively promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. The threat that this posed to academic freedom was shown by the Mark Hecht case, when an MRU instructor’s opinion piece criticizing diversity was denounced by a member of the faculty association executive, and the faculty association president pointed to the MRFA’s mission statement to suggest that Hecht could be subject to a complaint. Hecht was then denounced as a racist in the General Faculties Council, and about 30 faculty members wrote a secret letter to the MRU President expressing “ongoing concerns with discrimination on campus,” and alleging that Hecht’s piece contained a “blatantly Islamophobic and xenophobic message.” Hecht’s field school was then cancelled shortly afterwards, and the faculty association refused to take his grievance forward to arbitration on the grounds that it had little chance of success. This was in spite of the fact that one faculty member had been told by the coordinator of the program in Hecht’s department that the field school had been cancelled because of Hecht’s view that too much diversity undermined social trust.⁶

In 2019, the faculty association also embarked on a woke course of action that directly posed a threat to my academic freedom. This was its crusade to entrench support for indigenization into the

⁵ CAUT Equity Seminar and Workshop (December 2014). <https://wokeacademy.info/caut-equity-seminar-and-workshop-december-2014/> [accessed July 21, 2024].

⁶ Episode 14: Did Mark Hecht Violate a Diversity, Inclusion and Equity (DIE) ‘Loyalty Oath? WokeAcademy.Info, <https://wokeacademy.info/episode-14/> [accessed July 20, 2024].

Collective Agreement. On June 14, 2019, the faculty association signed a “Memorandum of Understanding”⁷ with MRU “Acknowledging Indigenous Knowledge and Ways of Knowing through Changes to Institutional Tenure and Promotion Criteria.” This understanding was then incorporated into the Collective Agreement between the MRFA and MRU. The promotion of indigenization by both the faculty association and the university administration set the

stage for my mobbing. Although my concerns about becoming a target were deflected with assertions that my academic freedom was protected by clauses in the Collective Agreement, my work environment became increasingly hostile. Faculty members, students and members of the public began to wonder why I was working at MRU when I opposed recognizing indigenous “ways of knowing.” After all, both the university and the union were arguing that “indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing” should be “acknowledged,” and so why weren’t all faculty members abiding by this affirmation?

Wokeism and My Mobbing

In Leymann’s work on mobbing, it is noted that this often begins with “a critical incident, after which a group mobilises to “get at and punish an individual” (Pace, 2024). The critical incidents pertaining to my mobbing, which occurred one day apart, were my posting of a satirical reply on Facebook on July 1, 2020, and my defense of the CBC journalist Wendly Mesley on Twitter the next day. With respect to the satirical reply, I opposed, in a humorous way, the demand of the anonymous group MRU Racial Advocacy that anti-racist training be imposed on all faculty members. My defense of Mesley concerned opposition to her being disciplined for mentioning the word nigger in a private editorial meeting in an anti-racist context, as well as her reference to the book title *White Niggers of America*.⁸ As I did not believe that Mesley had done anything wrong, I mentioned the epithet, on Twitter, in a similar manner.

The satirical letter angered the MRU faculty and students running anonymous woke groups claiming to be anti-racist. This led them to focus on my Twitter account to try to find damning posts indicating my anti-indigenous racism, transphobia, Islamophobia, white supremacy, etc. Defending Mesley, they believed, was the smoking gun showing that I was a racist. This led Gabrielle Lindstrom to encourage a mob to go after me. The mobbing was accelerated when I refused to back down from my position. Instead of retreating, I hit back at Lindstrom, even satirizing her claim that she was “loving and kind” and just trying to “bring people together with humility and grace.” I further enraged Lindstrom by satirizing her view that the subject of the Canadian residential schools should not be up for debate at a university. These were the triggers that eventually resulted in about 40

⁷ Episode 11: Is the Mount Royal Faculty Association Acting in Good Faith? WokeAcademy.Info, <https://wokeacademy.info/episode-11/> [accessed July 20, 2024].

⁸ A book published in Canada in 1968 which likened the struggles of French-Canadians to those of African-Americans.

faculty members and two anonymous Twitter accounts attacking me. As a result, I turned my Twitter account into the satirical character francXs mcgrath (NOT frances widdowson) - the “xister-in-law” of Andrew Doyle’s Titania McGrath. francXs

mcgrath enthusiastically congratulated the mob, repeating the words that they used (“epistemic terrorist,” “hateful harasser,” etc.) every time its members tried to poison my work environment and make my position at MRU unviable.

Eventually, a student by the name of Kenna Fraser started a petition asserting that I was a “racist professor” who should be fired.⁹ This was signed by over 6000 people. As a result of my “satirical warfare,” three harassment complaints were filed against me by Lindstrom, another indigenous scholar-activist, Renae Watchman, and a trans scholar-activist, D.A. Dirks. Dirks filed

a complaint against me for numerous thought crimes, including not taking the concept of “misgendering fatigue” seriously and satirizing the LGBTQ initialism (I referred to it as TGBQ2SLMNOP). As a result of these harassment investigations, I was found to have violated anti-harassment, human rights, and code of conduct policies, as well as having created a “toxic workplace environment.” One investigator, Jennifer Hawkins, even found that my Tweet satirizing “misgendering fatigue” and the LGBTQ initialism “mocked the complainant’s identity” and so I had violated two laws (the Alberta Occupational Health and Safety Act and the Alberta Human Rights Act). As a response to these findings, I filed 18 complaints against those faculty members who were most visible in my mobbing. As a result, two investigations were undertaken and six faculty members were found to have engaged in harassment against me. One of my complaints, however, was found to have been made frivolously and vexatiously and not in good faith. This resulted in a final strike and I was fired.¹⁰

All of these investigations were undertaken in spite of the fact that MRU had let it be known less than a year earlier (in December 2019) that it did not consider social media activities on private email accounts to be matters that could be investigated under workplace policies. This meant that, in October 2020, MRU suddenly changed course by accepting Gabrielle Lindstrom’s complaint about my social media activities. The reason for this change was because Lindstrom and the mob that she

⁹ Kenna Fraser, “Fire Frances Widdowson – A Racist Professor at MRU,” Change.org, <https://www.change.org/p/mount-royal-university-fire-frances-widdowson-a-racist-professor-at-mru> [accessed July 21, 2024].

¹⁰ The compilation of all of the evidence used by MRU to fire me is available in an Appendix posted online at <https://wokeacademy.info/frances-widdowsons-mobbing-and-woke-ism-paper/>. The following, documented in the Appendix, resulted in my firing: 1) one Tweet satirizing an MRU colleague’s reference to a “misgendering fatigue” cartoon and the LGBTQ initialism; 2) two Tweets satirizing Gabrielle Lindstrom’s attempts to get me fired and her blocking me after I responding to her attack; 3) six Tweets satirizing wokeism and the mobbing efforts against me; and 4) one complaint that I filed that was deemed to be frivolous and vexatious and made in bad faith. This is MRU’s entire case against me.

had instigated were becoming increasingly upset and vocal about the fact that I was satirizing her efforts to get me fired and poison my work environment.

A number of the members of the mob, in fact, were influential in the faculty association. This resulted in the MRFA filing two policy grievances on behalf of Gabrielle Lindstrom and D.A. Dirks (who was a member of the executive board at that time).¹¹ As a result of these grievances, MRU appeared to have been pressured by the union to initiate the investigations against me. MRU, of course, had the authority to resist this pressure from the union and protect my extramural academic freedom and freedom of expression rights, but this would have disrupted the corporate labour relations regime. Besides, MRU's adoption of indigenization as policy and its woke tendencies would have made it sympathetic to Lindstrom and Dirks' claims about me creating an "unsafe" work environment through satire on my personal social media accounts.

With the exception of the one Tweet satirizing "misgendering fatigue" and the LGBTQ initialism, therefore, all of the other reasons for my firing were because I was trying to defend myself from the mob. This was made possible because of both MRU's and the MRFA's acceptance of wokeism. Wokeism believes that equity or social justice can be achieved by affirming the subjective beliefs of people like Lindstrom, Dirks, and Watchman. Those who challenge their perspectives are accused of being racist and discriminatory or transphobic. And because many people at MRU wanted to be perceived as supporters of the aspirations of the oppressed, they were easily drawn into the mobbing campaign against me.

In addition to wokeism's use of compassion to mobilize people against dissenting faculty members, it is also suited to mobbing because it is opposed to liberal democratic concepts such as due process, transparency, and equality under the law. This is because wokeism maintains that existing legal protections benefit the powerful, and the oppressed can only rise up against their oppression by subverting these principles. As a result, the protections that academic dissenters used to enjoy have been seriously compromised. In my case, this enabled university policies to be deployed in a manner that supported those engaged in the mobbing. When I was investigated, for example, it was not considered that I was responding to a mob that was trying to get me fired. There was no contemplation that my satirical social media activities should be protected because it was declared that academic freedom cannot be used as a shield to engage in harassment. This required, of course, framing criticism of woke ideas as denigrating those claiming to be oppressed.

The Lines of Defence

Although wokeism will be a pernicious force in universities for years to come, two factors make it particularly virulent, increasing the likelihood of mobbing. These are one, the decline in the protection of academic freedom in universities, and two, the increasing tendency of universities to

¹¹ "D.A. Dirks Complaint Documents," WokeAcademy.Info, <https://wokeacademy.info/d-a-dirks-complaint-documents/> [accessed July 21, 2024].

make political statements. Academic freedom is under attack due to the corporatization of universities. While the academic model of a university is faculty members electing distinguished academics within their midst to do their “time in the barrel” as administrators and then return to their academic duties, administrators are now a part of the professional managerial class that is appointed by the Board of Governors (with faculty input, of course). These professional administrators are concerned about a university’s brand and putting “bums in seats.” Universities are becoming increasingly preoccupied not with the pursuit of truth and dissemination of knowledge, but in the selling of products, the most notable being degrees to students. Those faculty members that do not enhance a university’s ability to do this become a liability, and must be purged.

Today, many universities have a woke brand (MRU’s is: You Belong Here), and reputation managers enforce compliance with equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives such as indigenization, decolonization, and LGBTQ pride. This dovetails with the increasing prominence of Human Rights Commissions and the likelihood that any criticisms of the ideas of groups protected by the State will be seen as discriminatory attacks on the people themselves. The woke brand of universities also makes it likely that they will continually make a number of political statements about things such as trans activism, Black Lives Matter, and the need to support the claims of indigenous groups. Attention should be paid to the arguments in the Kalven Report, compiled by the University of Chicago in the 1960s in response to demands that it support opposition to the Vietnam War. The Kalven Report warned universities against making political statements because this encouraged intellectual conformity, which could lead to the punishment of dissent (Widdowson, 2022b).

All of these bureaucratic changes will not matter, however, if professors continue to embrace the woke position that ideas should be censored if they challenge identity politics. We need to rediscover the values of The Enlightenment, which assumed that the free exchange of ideas was essential for democracy and self-actualization. In this respect, the views of John Stuart Mill are particularly relevant (Mill, 1859). Mill argued that it was important not to suppress ideas even if they were believed to be false or immoral. This was because the ideas in question could be true or partially true, and even if they were false, they still had value by enabling us to have a more robust understanding of the truth.

Although the mobbing that I endured has taken a significant personal toll, it has been beneficial in that it dramatically improved my understanding of the problems facing academic freedom in the academy. Instead of protecting me from a mobbing that undermined academic freedom, the institutional acceptance of wokeism meant that the university colluded with the faculty association to make my position untenable at MRU. Although my career as a professor has been ended by this injustice, I have embarked upon another one. This is documenting the woke destruction of our institutions for future generations.

Author

Frances Widdowson is a former professor of Economics, Justice, and Policy Studies at Mount Royal University. She is editor of the Newsletter of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS) and is a vocal advocate for academic freedom and free speech. You may find more information about her case at www.wokeacademy.info. She is a co-author of "Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry" with Albert Howard, editor of "Indigenizing the University" and author of "Separate but Unequal."

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