

Shoot the Messenger: A Personal Account of Academic Mobbing

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Abstract

This paper recounts my experience as an engaged faculty member and mobbing victim at my former university over almost a decade. The paper also discusses the lessons that I feel my case has for the study of workplace mobbing, in particular, in academia, and more specifically, with respect to intramural academic freedom, that is, the academic freedom to critique the university itself. Issues discussed include the demise of shared academic governance, the chilling effect of campus respectful environment statements, the professionalization of faculty associations and unions, the kangaroo courts of external investigations, the demise on campus of the primacy of the facts and the truth, and the personal consequences on mobbing victims. There is some concentration on how university statements on respectful workplace environments are overriding intramural academic freedom, and how they are encouraging academic mobbing. University administrations and faculty unions should not continue to mob and shoot the messengers. I offer this paper in the hope of helping to stem this troubling tide in the halls of today's mob-ruled academia.

Keywords: *Mobbing, Academic, Governance.*

Introduction

I was a successful academic at two universities and one university college, with tenure at all three, and I retired in 2021, after 37 years of teaching, research, and service. After 14 years at my first university, where I obtained tenure at the rank of associate professor, I moved across the country to a university college which in 2005 was incorporated into a large university as a second campus. The administration, faculty union and collective agreement became that of the large university. I was the last chair of my department at the university college. The first six sections of the paper recount my experience as an engaged faculty member and mobbing victim at this new second campus, 2012-21. These sections cover in some detail the facts of my case, however there is of course so much more that could be written. First, I cover the prelude and critical event that triggered the mobbing in 2012, and then the post-critical events in the ensuing years that intensified the mobbing, to 2018. This culminated in a group of senior administrators becoming the leaders of the mob, including my dean,

and my union's executive staff, and in the last two of these first six sections I document the investigations and incriminations that resulted in my choosing retirement in 2021. The remaining sections of the paper discuss six major lessons that I feel my case has for the study of workplace mobbing, in particular, in academia, and more specifically, with respect to intramural academic freedom, that is, the academic freedom to critique the university itself. In these later sections of the paper, I concentrate in part on the chilling effect that university statements on respectful workplace environments are having on intramural academic freedom, and how they are encouraging academic mobbing.

Prelude to Academic Mobbing

For the first few years, everything was fine. My department was amalgamated with four others into a larger academic unit, one of six within a large Faculty. I was an enthusiastic supporter of the takeover, if not the loss of my department, the faculty union, and the collective agreement of the university college, and I was a member of the academic planning committee for the new campus. In 2008 I became head, for a 3-year term, of the new large academic unit, with 5 disciplines and 35 permanent faculty members. I got on well with my faculty members, but there arose some early minor problems with the senior administration. I asked for the leadership committee (dean and heads) meeting minutes, recording decision-making, to be made available to faculty and staff, and the committee passed a motion for this to be done. 6 months later I asked in a meeting of the committee about this, and the dean's assistant, in the absence of the dean, said "Oh, the dean decided not to do that". As head, I complained about the allocation of performance pay increments being the same for each of the 6 academic units in the Faculty despite my unit being twice as big as any other unit. I regularly sent detailed academic and strategic plans for my unit to my dean and never heard back on any. I made other suggestions for improved governance, such that my dean did not want me to continue as head after my term was up. I went on administrative leave, and this was when problems really began to emerge.

The Critical Event in 2012 That Triggered my Academic Mobbing

In my term as head, I had expanded student numbers and courses in my own discipline by about double (the campus was on a major expansion plan) but now, after I stepped down as head and went on leave, the new discipline coordinator, supported in particular by two other colleagues, decided to cut back on the supply of courses and seats in courses for 2012-13 by not replacing any faculty leaves or buyouts. Somewhat inexplicably, the acting dean allowed this, presumably because it would save the Faculty some money in the upcoming academic year. Although, not coincidentally, this saved on replacement hiring efforts for the new discipline coordinator and two supportive colleagues, the main argument made was that if the discipline was able to demonstrate a shortage of supply of courses and seats, the university might give it, in order to increase supply again, new tenure-track faculty positions. However, before the cutback in courses and seats for 2012-13 was enacted, and based upon student number expansion in 2011-12, my discipline was given a new tenure-track faculty position to be in place for 2012-13. The new discipline coordinator, supported by the same

two other colleagues, wished the position to be given to an existing temporary replacement hire in the discipline, in order to save on the bother of a time-consuming hiring process. The coordinator informed me, in an email, that the purpose of the required shortlisting and interviewing process for the new position was to make an offer to this professional and personal friend as soon as possible. I was asked in the email to go along with this plan but I did not respond.

Better external candidates were interviewed, and the initial selection committee vote, despite tortuous and quite embarrassing attempts by the chair of the committee (the discipline coordinator) to manipulate the vote results in favour of the internal candidate, was in favour of an external candidate. The committee chair then launched into an email tirade against me for recommending a motion to make the first offer to this external candidate, that I must have had a conflict of interest and that they were considering “bringing in the higher authorities.” Another faculty member in on the proposed fix, made, in emails, sexist, racist and disparaging comments about two of the external candidates, including the recommended one. In the end the committee chair managed to get one member to change their vote (so as not to cause, as the member put it, “a split in the department”) and the internal candidate was recommended to the dean. I complained formally to the dean and provost, copied to my discipline members, and asked for a formal investigation. This was refused, and my complaint was ignored. The temporary hire internal member and friend was hired into the tenure-track position. I now had a large target on my back for the administration and my discipline members-in-on-the fix, to shoot at. This is why and when my academic mobbing by these and others, including my dean and provost, began in earnest.

Contributing Post-Critical Events to my Increased Academic Mobbing, 2012-14

My 6-month administrative leave ended in July 2012 and later in that year I challenged my university in a letter to the local newspaper that it had to be aware of the growing number of international students on campus displacing domestic students in disciplines and courses popular with international students. I said that the university needed to be wary of this and act accordingly, such as using the high international student tuition revenues it was receiving to expand the number of seats in these disciplines and courses. The provost did not try to engage me in conversation, but instead wrote their own letter to the paper in rebuttal, saying in effect that I was just a self-serving faculty member wishing to expand his own discipline, and listing the many other needs the university had for use of the international student tuition revenues, none of which were more classes or seats in classes. I soon was getting mobbing emails from my acting head and department colleagues (the ones in on the prior fix) regarding this exchange. Then in early 2013 I had articles published of mine in the student newspaper regarding the campus’s academic priorities. I received more mobbing emails from department colleagues regarding these articles.

In late 2013 and early 2014 I was a member of a Faculty Council sub-committee regarding the poor workplace experiences of faculty members in my Faculty, as demonstrated by the results of recent surveys. These results were abysmal, a fact that the university and Faculty dean did not wish to have highlighted by the sub-committee. The administration was silent on the findings of the

subcommittee's work. The sub-committee proposed a motion to the Faculty Council that there be an external review of the Faculty, as normally required every 5 years, and this was into the 9th year of the Faculty's existence. The motion passed, and the request was sent up to the provost. The request was denied. I was becoming a large thorn in the side of the administration.

Also in 2013-14, I chaired the selection committee for a 12-month temporary replacement faculty hire in my discipline. Colleagues of the previous fix now manipulated the selection, via various nefarious means, to one of their personal and professional friends from their alma mater. I resigned as chair of the committee, and complained to the dean and provost, and opined on how personal and professional relationships between myself and certain members of my discipline had melted down. The dean and provost were again not interested, and the silence of the administration cancerously grew, as did the size of the academic mob. The hiring of the friend from the alma mater was avoided by my inadvertently finding out that the person could not legally work in Canada.

The person finally hired, female and of colour, was hired at a lower rank than what had been advertised and applied for, and was given only a 10-month and not a 12-month contract. The collective agreement stated that the normal faculty member vacation, arranged informally between the member and the head, per year, was one month. The 7 courses assigned in the contract given to the hire took up the full 10 months of her contract, with no provision for any vacation. Given that I had chaired the selection committee, I complained to the administration and union. I then found out that a male, white member (actually the internal temporary replacement candidate hired into the tenure-track position in 2012) with identical experience and actually the same university of in-progress PhD, two years before, was given a salary almost \$15,000 a year higher, at the correct and advertised rank, and given an 11-month contract, 10 months full time teaching and 1 month vacation. I brought this to the attention of the campus equity office. After much administrative and union resistance, the rank was corrected to the advertised and applied-for rank (the same rank as the previous male, white hire of two year before) and the salary raised to the same level as the previous hire, with a new 11-month contract, providing for 1-month of vacation, as per the previous hire.

On being offered a new second contract for 2014-15 in May 2014, the rank for the member was downgraded, the salary cut, the contract length shortened to 10 1/2 months, and the workload increased to 8 courses, presumably her punishment for arguing with the union and the university about her previous contract. The increased workload took up the entire 10 1/2 months. The associate dean told the member in an email that the provision for vacation was 18 days, not a month, based on their calculation of 10.5/12 (the associate dean was not from the math department) and that she could take their vacation days not, say, at the end of their contract, but on the days of the week she was not teaching or had other duties such as office hours, grading or exam invigilation. The faculty member, for their vacation, wished to visit her family in Africa. The union officer in charge of the case told myself and the member that the union had brought a grievance that demanded a contract that would allow for 1-month vacation. Months later in November the union officer in charge of the case asked the member to meet with the head to try to resolve things informally. The officer did not suggest that she be accompanied by a union officer despite that being the collective agreement

procedure when a grievance was in play. I accompanied the member to the meeting much to the displeasure of the head. At that meeting (and later in an email) the head started listing all of the days (one day here, two days there) the member was not teaching or had exams to monitor or grading to do as when the member could take her 18 days of vacation. The member and I walked out of the meeting after 5 minutes.

I then pointed out to the union officer and human resources manager that the university was violating the Provincial (i.e. State) Labour Standards Act on provision of vacation, which states that vacation time must be provided in at least one-week blocks if so desired by the employee. Both were highly displeased to have this act of the legislature waved in their faces. The member, after having asked nicely for months, then demanded to see the union grievance letter, supposedly filed 6 months earlier. There had been no grievance letter ever filed; the union officer had lied about that. One was then hastily sent in. I complained to the union executive director and the case was taken away from the officer. In the end the union executive director and the administration settled the case on behalf of the member (without asking her) by extending her pay by one week. The member left the university in complete disgust of the administration and union. The episode left the relationship between my head and myself permanently and irreparably scarred, and made me even bigger of a mobbing target for the administration and union.

Meanwhile in September 2014 the university put out a press release saying that enrolment on my campus was at its highest ever level. I looked up the official public data and found that in fact total enrolment was down 5% from the year earlier, 1st year enrolment down by 13%. I wrote an article for the student newspaper remarking on this first campus decline in enrolment after 9 years of expansion. My dean then emailed me setting up a meeting and saying that a member of the human resources department would be at the meeting and that I would be advised to bring a union representative with me. My head and dean then immediately cut off my access to all internal student records data, strangely because these were not the public website access data I had used for my article. My email account vanished for three days and my provost told me that "it must be a virus of some sort". The university registrar had a letter published in the student newspaper saying my data were incorrect. One month later in the annual enrolment report to the Senate it was confirmed that my data were absolutely correct, which was not surprising given that they were the official, and public, university data.

After being asked by email for my opinion on a proposed curriculum revision in my discipline, and after truthfully and respectfully expressing my opinion, I received an email in reply and copied to others from a colleague (the former discipline coordinator of the fixed selection committee) saying that in his view I, and my opinion, was "wrong and malicious." I replied by return email that "I assume I will have to do something about this accusation." I made a complaint to the provost about the accusation and met with her in early December. I reported to her the melted-down state of my discipline relationships as a result of the fixed and manipulated selection committees of the recent past, and the seriously scarred relationships between myself and my head, and certain discipline

members, one of whom, in an email, had alluded to using physical violence against me (the reader can guess who). After the meeting I received a Letter of Expectation from the provost saying that my comment, after being accused of having an opinion that was “wrong and malicious”, namely that “I assume I will have to do something about this accusation,” was threatening and disrespectful. I refused to accept the letter and sent it back.

Also at this early December 2014 meeting I reported to my provost, and gave her a file to read confirming the fact, that my head had lied in his letter to the Senate promotions committee on a recent promotion file. In his letter he wrote that members of the promotion committee had unanimously recommended the promotion and that all members had been at all meetings and all had voted on the file. In fact 2 of the 5 members of the committee (of which I was a member and had attended all meetings, and voted) came to no meetings whatsoever and hence did not, at any time or place, vote on the file. A “white lie” I was told by a committee member. So now the provost decided to really lay into me for having the audacity to question the ethics and competence of a university administrator, my head, and sent me a Letter of Discipline marked “Private and Confidential” and not to be distributed to anyone other than a union officer. In this letter I was charged with insubordination and serious misconduct for my “negative communication campaign” regarding my head and dean, and was threatened with “the termination of my employment.” My provost in this letter also offered funding for my “re-education” and declared that my allegations of dishonesty of my head and serious academic misconduct of discipline members fixing and manipulating selection committees in the past were all “unsubstantiated.”

The Mobbing Increases due to Senate and Union Activities and Advocacy 2015-17

Around Christmas 2014, after receiving my Letter of Discipline from the provost, I reported to my union executive director my stress, anxiety, negative thoughts about the university, and history of past clinical depression. I wrote a long letter to send back to my provost responding to the Letter of Discipline she had sent to me, but was persuaded by my union officials not to send it. Instead, it was agreed between the union and the university that I could remove myself from service in my unit, discipline and to my head, given the toxicity there, and concentrate my service elsewhere in the university. Relieved of my unit responsibilities, and of having to deal with my corrupt colleagues and head, my focus turned elsewhere. I was voted into the Senate until 2017 and then again until 2020.

In 2016 I emailed the university president, copied to the campus provost, my dean, and others, about the shockingly poor treatment of contingent faculty in a unit of my Faculty. In a letter of response from the provost, my reports of poor treatment were dismissed. I also alerted the human resources office to their miscalculation (in favour of the university) of years of service of contingent faculty. This led to a union grievance and the correction of the faulty calculation algorithm.

As a Senator in late 2016 I raised the issue of a Faculty on the campus advertising a new program of study that had not been approved by the Senate. This for-profit summer program exceeded the university allowable student course load per term, and waived all Senate-approved course

prerequisites. My expressed concerns regarding this program got the many levels of administration that had allowed this program to be developed without Senate consultation and approval extremely annoyed at me, but after many behind-the-scenes program and advertising revisions, the program was eventually cancelled and all advertising for it withdrawn.

In May 2017 I then made frontpage news in the major Provincial (State) newspaper regarding my finding that international students could be admitted to the university with lower grades than those required of domestic students. I gave numerous TV and radio interviews on this story, with no response by the university. I wrote to the university president and my union about mismanagement in a Faculty on my campus, which I fully documented, and I was told by both that I could not raise my concerns because I was not a faculty member in that Faculty, and that neither the president nor my union was interested in the various violations of the collective agreement in that Faculty, and that it was not my concern. I also raised the issue at the Senate of the administration moving to shut down a Faculty on the campus and transfer it's administration to the main university campus, without prior Senate consultation. My concern was ignored. In late 2017 I published a scholarly paper in a prominent regional peer-reviewed academic journal about the development of my campus 2005-17 in which I was quite critical. This made me a renewed target for administrators. In October 2018 another regional newspaper story was published about my findings regarding international students at the university.

In March 2017 I was elected to an executive position on the local campus committee of my faculty union, for a 3-year term. This is when the mobbing really went into overdrive. In my union capacity as an executive officer of the local committee I began working with colleagues who had been mistreated by the university and the union. As a Senator representing the joint Faculties I raised the issue of a faculty member's prospective graduate students being turned away by their Faculty administrators. I was told by the campus principal acting as Senate chair that this was a workload and hence a collective agreement matter, not a matter for the Senate, so as a union executive officer I brought it to the attention of the acting provost.

I then complained to the union about its staff's poor handling of files on my campus. This complaint was ignored for months and then dismissed. I attempted to get a local union newsletter reestablished on my campus but this was quashed by union headquarters on the main campus as being too critical of university administration. I was refused my normal place on the union's grievance committee because the union staff, in reaction to my critique of them, said they would refuse to attend meetings of the committee if I was in attendance. I received a letter from the union president saying that I was to butt out of trying to help faculty members on my campus, and that that was a job only of the union staff at main campus headquarters. I then within a few days received a letter from my campus provost telling me the same thing, and that the union president had directed the administration at my campus to ignore any correspondence from me in which I was purporting to act in my union executive capacity. My provost again told me that I should avail myself of the physiological testing resources of the university. I complained to my campus principal, and she also told me to butt out

of where I did not belong. The union and the university were colluding in stopping me from carrying out my union duties as an elected local executive officer, with interchangeable mobbing letters of “cease and desist”.

Still in 2017 I was approached in my union capacity by another faculty member from the same Faculty of the member whose approved graduate students were being turned away by their Faculty administration. He related to me that he had been removed as graduate coordinator for the Faculty in October 2015 and that his Faculty had suspended admissions into the graduate program in the Faculty, without Senate approval. He told me that all applications for graduate study now went to the dean and director of the Faculty, to be turned down, rather than to the Senate-approved graduate admission committee of the Faculty, of which he had been chair. The member was worried that his removal and opposition to the suspension might be deemed prejudicial to his tenure application. He provided me with the administrator emails confirming the program suspension, jointly undertaken by the dean and director of the Faculty and the dean of the College of Graduate Studies, but without having the suspension approved by the Senate, without informing prospective student applicants or faculty members, and without posting the suspension on any website. While the program was thus secretly suspended, October 2015-March 2018, prospective students continued to apply, paying a \$100 application fee.

The Intensification of Mobbing into 2018

On a related front, and consistent with my faculty union duties, in early 2018 I noticed a posting for a new renewable lecturer position, and asked a long-serving (10 years) contingent faculty member if he had been given notice of the posting and an opportunity to apply for it, as required by the collective agreement. He told me no to both, and that he had a recent meeting with his head, who told him that his future employment prospects at the university were bleak, because, the head said, she had been told by the administration (the associate dean) to try to get rid of the member (and another long-serving contingent member in the same unit) by assigning them “courses they can’t teach.” The member noted how disappointed he was with the university giving him no consideration nor credit for their 10-year highly-evaluated teaching service and acting as he put it as a “consciousness sociopath.” I brought the matter to the attention of the dean of the Faculty. He replied that I was making “serious allegations” and “casting several aspersions and making several insinuations” and that he would decide on “appropriate steps.” I never again heard back from him on the matter. However, the posting for which the contingent member was well qualified for was cancelled, and replaced by a posting requiring the teaching of courses which the member could indeed not teach. These were presumably the dean’s “appropriate steps”. The union professional staff said fine, the university can do anything it wants.

Meanwhile, the other long-serving (9 years) contingent member in the same unit sent an email to his discipline members in March 2018 asking why he was not being considered for a new renewable lecturer position posted in his discipline, for which he had also been given no notice of nor opportunity to apply, as required by the collective agreement. The member, who had successfully

taught almost a third of all undergraduate courses offered in his discipline over the previous 9 years, was called in to a meeting by his head, and with a human resources officer in attendance, and was told that his email was “inappropriate”. Two months later in May 2018 the member was terminated, and then denied his full severance pay entitlement by the union and the administration.

In March 2018 I ran for vice-president of the faculty union, convinced that something had to be done about its complicity and collusion. In advance of the election, I emailed, to about 400 union members, mainly the ones on my own campus, a careful, fully-documented and reasoned analysis of the sweetheart unionism deal I had discovered between the union and the university administration, and the poor treatment of faculty members by the union on my local campus. In this analysis I also highlighted my academic mobbing by the union and my campus senior administration. The next day the Executive Committee of the union sent out a “Member Advisory” to all 3,700 union members declaring, as judge, jury, and executioner, that my analysis was “wrong” (with no opposing argument) and that in its view my analysis constituted “bullying and harassment of our staff.” Various faculty members on both campuses complained of the union’s action, to no avail. I of course could not respond as I did not have access to the 3,700 union member listserv.

Returning to the member who was worried about his tenure case due to his removal as graduate coordinator in his Faculty and his principled opposition to the secret suspension of admissions to the graduate program in that Faculty, he had been told by his dean, on first reappointment, that he was well on-track for tenure. At his second reappointment, he was told he would need for tenure at least 4 peer-reviewed published papers prior to and since first appointment. This he was well in the process of getting. Then, 6 months before his final consideration for tenure, he was told by the same dean that he needed at least 7 peer-reviewed papers, all in top journals, within the appointment period and not prior, and that tenure was hence likely impossible. The member complained to the union about the shifting standards. The union’s response, 6 months before the tenure hearing, was to tell him that his best course of action was to concentrate on increasing his publication rate. On him being denied tenure, the union refused to appeal the decision to arbitration.

Meanwhile, as a Senator, and in early 2018, I brought the matter of admissions to the graduate program in the previously mentioned Faculty being secretly and illegitimately suspended, to the attention of the Senate, and proposed a motion that the \$100 application fees of students applying since October 2015 be returned to the applicants. The Senate agenda committee first refused to allow the motion to be added to the upcoming meeting, and told me that I had to make a notice of motion at that meeting. As I was giving the notice of motion at that meeting, the chair of Senate, the university president, allowed the dean of graduate studies to bolt up and shout out, without leave to speak, that there was no suspension. The chair of the Senate, the university president, then refused to allow me to give the notice of motion because I did not give the “precise wording” for the motion. This was in violation of Robert’s Rules, which the Senate followed, that state that only the general subject matter of a motion is required for a notice of motion. After the meeting, another member of the Senate provided a precise wording and the notice of motion was finally allowed, presumably

because the Senate Secretary had reminded the university president of Robert's Rules. The Senate agenda committee then refused to allow any background information to be provided to the Senate to accompany the motion. Hence, just before the upcoming meeting I emailed a 2-page backgrounder to the motion to all of the Senators I had emails for.

At the Senate meeting, an associate dean called my 2-pager "vexatious" saying I had illegitimately emailed other Senators this material (it was however well within the rules of Senate to have done so) and moved that the motion be voted on without discussion. This administrator's attempt to bypass debate on the motion failed. The dean of graduate studies then got up to say there was and had been no suspension, that admission offers had been made since October 2015 to date, but that none had resulted in any admissions, since all the admission offers made were turned down by the student applicants. In my 2-pager backgrounder I had provided the administrator email evidence that there was and had been such a suspension. Another administrator and Senate member then spoke to say that now that the Senate had the direct word of the dean, that was sufficient to end the matter, and the Senate voted down the motion by an overwhelming majority. The only votes for the motion were mine and that of the member who had provided the precisely-worded motion. The dean's word was deemed by the Senators to be superior to the truth and the facts. A journalist with the student newspaper on campus sent in a freedom of information request to the university for the redacted offer and rejection letters, and data on the number of offers and rejections, 2015 to date.

The Mob of Deans and Directors Gang-Up and Attack

I found out from my dean only in August 2018, a full four months after the event, and while I was on vacation, that four deans, directors and associate deans, including the former dean of graduate studies, had made complaints to the university, just before and after the April Senate meeting, about my 2-page backgrounder, and under the university's respectful environment statement. I was asked to meet with my dean immediately, during my vacation period, and that I would be advised to bring union representation. I asked to be sent the complaints before I could possibly meet. 10 days later I was forwarded the complaints, and given 5 days to respond. I was still on vacation. The complaints were all made within hours and days of each other, and demonstrated something of a ganging-up. They argued that I had disrespectfully undermined their roles as deans and directors, and that I should be at least disciplined, if not suspended, or perhaps fired. My response spoke of my "academic mobbing for uncovering and prosecuting the facts."

In late September 2018 an external investigator, a lawyer who had worked many times in the past for the faculty union, was hired to consider and report on the complaints. I was denied a request to see the terms of reference of the investigation. The student journalist received the data and facts from their freedom of information request of 6 months earlier, in October 2018, sent from a new acting dean of graduate studies, the previous dean having gone on leave or retired, it was unclear which. The facts showed that no offers of admission had been made in the graduate program of the Faculty from 2015 to date. The former dean of graduate studies had lied to the Senate. I hence brought another motion to the November meeting of the Senate, that there be an investigation into the

administration of this graduate program. After about a hour of debate, all students on the Senate, except one who abstained because they had only been added to the Senate that morning and did not know the issue, voted for my motion, all administrators against. The motion failed on a 15-16 vote, with many faculty members of the Senate not wishing to be seen to be voting against the administration, and with the dean of the Faculty who had suspended the admissions to its program being the deciding vote against.

The Tool of the Mob: “External” Investigation Report 2019

On meeting with the external investigator, it became clear that the actual truth and facts of the matter and November Senate meeting discussion of them were “outside of the terms of reference” because the investigator had been hired prior to the actual facts being released by the university and prior to the debate at Senate where the truth and the facts had been fully revealed. The investigator reported to the university in early December 2018 and I was sent a copy of the investigator’s report on January 31, 2019. The “finding of fact” of the investigator was that there had been no suspension, just a “restriction” of admissions (to zero I guess). Back in 2017 a member of the faculty union staff had already described it, in an email to the former graduate coordinator who had been removed from his position and who was opposed to the suspension, as merely a “restriction”. This email, showing that the union was aware of the issue, was used by the investigator to conclude that “faculty had been informed” about it. I was denied access to the tape recordings of the Senate meetings, and regarding the dean of graduate studies brusquely interrupting my notice of motion at the April Senate meeting by shouting out “there is no suspension” this event, according to the investigator, “did not occur.” On the dean of graduate studies stating at the May Senate meeting that offers had been made in the period and turned down by the student applicants, which as the facts released in October 2018 confirmed was untrue, the investigator found that “I chose to disregard that evidence” of the dean and that “I preferred to believe the hearsay evidence of two faculty members”. These were the one who had her graduate students turned away by her administrators and the one who had been removed as graduate coordinator and told in writing that the program was suspended, “rather than the word of the deans and directors.”

The investigator found that “I did not set out to gather and consider all available, relevant evidence” that “available, relevant evidence” being the “word” of the deans and directors, and that since I was “unsuccessful as an elected Senator in obtaining the required data” (before the student journalist obtained them via a freedom of information request) it was “vexatious” of me to “continue trying to obtain it [sic]”. She also concluded that I disrespectfully “undermined the deans’ authority” by not accepting their word as fact and “publicly contradicting them.” The overriding reason the investigator gave for siding with the administrators in the matter was that the converse conclusion “would show that Dr. Wylie was right and the university administration was wrong.” This was to the investigator, hired by the university administration, presumably unthinkable. Not only that, but the investigator managed to find that I was “malicious and vexatious” because “Wylie had a desire to

show that he was right, and the administration was wrong.” Arguing I was right and the administration wrong was declared to be a malicious act on my part.

On another front, in March 2019 I expressed my disappointment, in an email to all faculty members of my Faculty, at what I argued to be a weak external review of my Faculty that had just been conducted. This was the first external review to be carried out of the Faculty in the 14 years of its existence, in spite of official university policy that such reviews be carried out every five years. In response to my email, a former dean of my Faculty replied in an email to me and copied to all faculty members that asked of me; “Perhaps it is time for some self-reflection, given your state of perpetual unhappiness. Why not resign your tenured faculty position (with its wonderful salary, great benefits, and permanency) and move on to something else more rewarding? Who at [the campus] is keeping you chained to your misery?” He then went on to denigrate my candidacy in the upcoming union election. A faculty member of my discipline (the one who chaired the fixed selection committee back in 2012 and who had intense animosity toward me since then, including alluded in writing to using physical violence on me) responded to the former dean’s email by filing yet another complaint against me under the respectful environment statement and suggested to the university that it should restrict my access to its email system.

My union executive director wrote to me in March 2019 that the external investigation of the complaints of the dean and directors mob was, in the union’s view, conducted properly and fairly, and that the investigator’s findings were now the truth and the facts that I could no longer dispute or challenge. I could now only offer “mitigating information” such as a profuse apology, or “if there is an underlying medical condition that could possibly be a contributing factor to your conduct, it could help to mitigate any potential serious consequences.” I of course reported on my past history of episodes of clinical depression and anxiety, which both the union and the university were already fully aware of. On May 13, 2019, I was placed on paid medical leave on the advice of my doctor, who recommended medical leave “until [I have] had an [independent psychiatric] evaluation and the situation with the University has resolved.” The university commissioned a medical examination and report. The examination tests indicated “significant depression”, “depression of moderate severity”, “moderate social anxiety”, and “lifelong history of Generalized Anxiety Disorder “which is certainly much more severe now in the face of [my] conflict with the university”. I was evaluated as “moderately anxious and depressed” and that I have “been suffering with depression for the last several years [which does] not affect [my] ability to teach or do [my] research, except when on medical leave as now.”

The New Acting Dean of my Faculty Joins the Mob

On July 2, 2019 I began my approved 1-month vacation period to August 2, out of the country. Armed with the psychiatric report, which I had not yet been given, but with a long letter, riddled with errors of fact and interpretation and obviously drafted in advance by the office of human resources, my new acting dean sent in his recommendation to the university president on July 16, 2019. He argued that the finding of “malice” by the investigator, that is, my arguing that I was right

and the university wrong, constituted “serious misconduct” and hence he would recommend “immediate termination of my employment” but that given my medical circumstances he would instead recommend a one-year suspension without pay. The university president wrote to me on July 26 to say that he agreed with the acting dean and asked for a meeting. On the same day of July 26 my acting dean sent me an email telling me to cut short my already approved vacation, return to the country, and have my doctor confirm my immediate return to work, and that I was expected to be teaching my assigned courses in the September-December term.

On returning from vacation and to my place of residence in early August I was able to access the psychiatric report. My family doctor recommended to the university a continuation of my medical leave and no contact from the university for 6 weeks. On August 8, despite being in receipt of my doctor’s advice, my dean sent me a second letter in which he stated that he was ignoring the advice of my doctor for continued medical leave and demanded that I return to work immediately, or be placed on unpaid leave. On August 15, again despite being in receipt of my doctor’s order for the university not to contact me, my dean sent me a third letter “re: failure to return to the workplace.” He stated in this letter that I would be removed from paid medical leave on August 17 and placed on unpaid leave, and that my medical benefits would end August 31. All of this occurred. Also that “failure to return to work by August 31 could have implications for [my] employment.” I of course, on the advice of my doctor, did not return to work. On September 3, my acting dean sent me a fourth letter. This time he reiterated that in his opinion “there is no medical basis for your continued absence from the workplace” and that if I failed to return to work by September 20 and to “undertake your assigned duties”, that is, teach my courses, “the University will consider your absence to be without approved leave” and “will have no alternative but to consider all of its options and the subsequent impact on your employment relationship with the University.” In all I received five such threatening letters from my acting dean, July 26-September 13, some snail-mail delivered to my home.

On September 23 I was copied on a letter from the university associate director of human resources to my union executive director stating that my pay and medical benefits were being restored retroactively to August 17 given that the university now accepted my doctor’s recommendation of medical leave. There was no apology for the letters of my dean from late July on. The letter from human resources instead made disparaging statements questioning “my conduct” regarding my medical leave. I asked the associate director of human resources to retract these statements, but no retraction was made. On October 27, I provided the university with a note from my counsellor which was his “written acknowledgement confirming my capacity to continue my participation in the University’s processes.” So on November 9 I returned to work. Given my recent absences and upcoming sabbatical leave beginning January 1, 2020, I resigned from the Senate. On my resignation the secretary of Senate wrote to me to say “Dear Peter, I know that we have had some challenging interactions at Senate but I have always very much appreciated that what you have said is what you firmly believe is in the best interests of the university; I thank you for that and shall miss you at Senate.”

Retirement

The acting dean's threatening letters I saw as the culmination of this particular personal academic mobbing drama; of almost 10 years of my academic mobbing by various colleagues in my discipline, various heads, deans, provosts and principals, human resources, the faculty union, and the university, whatever it was. In early January 2020, aged 64, and with the threat of suspension or termination hanging over my head, I accepted a retirement package in settlement of all matters. I would retire on April 1, 2021, aged 65. On the day in January when I signed the package, both my dean, at a meeting of Faculty Council, and my head, at a unit meeting, announced that I had retired. My email account disappeared, only to reappear 3 days later. I was then able to email my Faculty colleagues that the administrative announcements of my retirement were strangely premature.

My university email account disappeared immediately on the actual day of my retirement, April 1, 2021. I was later not conferred the Emeritus status to which I was entitled to by my age and years of service to the university, which also confers library and parking privileges, and a university email account. Since my mobbing began in earnest in 2012, to my retirement in 2021, I was given no performance increments to my salary, despite relatively impressive teaching, research, service, and publication records. However I fully believe I scored a moral victory in these matters. As a song from Madonna goes, "I have truth on my side, you only have deceit." Or as Elvis reportedly said, "Truth is like the sun. You can shut it out for a time, but it ain't going away." Or as Leonard Cohen wrote and sang: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." I believe I can hold my head high, which is more than what can be said, I believe, of the faculty union officials and university administrators in these matters. And of course I realize that my mobbing case (which I could easily write a book about I suppose) is far from being the most egregious among recent cases at my university or at other universities that I know of. It is merely the one I know most about, having been the victim.

Lessons Learned from My Case

The above are the facts of my experience as an academic mobbing target for almost a decade, 2012-21. For the remaining sections of this paper I focus on what I have concluded to be the lessons my academic mobbing experience points to with respect to intramural academic freedom, the academic freedom to critique the university itself. In addition, I will concentrate on what I have found to be the chilling effect that university statements on respectful workplace environments are having on intramural academic freedom, and how they are encouraging academic mobbing. I have identified six areas to discuss, namely, the demise of shared academic governance, the chilling effect of campus respectful environment statements, the professionalization of faculty associations and unions, the kangaroo courts of "external" investigations, the demise on campus of the primacy of the facts and the truth, and the personal consequences on mobbing victims of all of the above.

The Demise of Shared Academic Governance

A comment made in the press by a Columbia University professor in May 2024 observing on-campus protests regarding the war in Gaza and the administration bringing in the police to break them up was: “The old idea that the core of the university is a community of scholars is definitely dead”.¹ In my own experience, this is indeed the case. No longer can faculty say, as a Columbia University faculty member told Dwight Eisenhower in 1950 and speaking of the faculty body, “Mr. President. We are not employees of the university. We are the university.”² Universities today are administrative corporations, and as Henry Rosovsky, former President of Harvard University, wrote “the quality of a university campus is likely negatively correlated with the unrestrained power of administrators”.³ No longer do administrators work for the faculty and staff of the university. The faculty and staff work for them. As a mere faculty member you are called out for insubordination and disrespect if you criticize the administrators, and they will academically mob you. Intramural academic freedom, the academic freedom of faculty to criticize the university they work for, is certainly dead. There is a power imbalance, the professor versus the administration. This is what has been termed as the fall of the faculty and the rise of the all-administrative university.

I was a minor whistleblower who exposed the minor malfeasance of university administrators and union officials. But if you embarrass and ruffle feathers in the administration or union, no matter how minor the matter, you are in trouble, you will be mobbed. The deans, directors, union staff and other administrators active in my own case had an extraordinary hypersensitivity to scrutiny, transparency, my investigations as an elected Senator, and my exposure of minor administrative malfeasance on their part. The modern university's version of shared academic governance is blind acceptance by the faculty of the authority of the administration and union, lest you be called out for insubordination, harassment and disrespect. One cannot question the administration, even in the Senate. As a faculty member, one must go along with the union and administration to get along with them. As I found out in my own case, even criticism of my department head was not allowed.

Moreover, my university's policy on appropriate use of information states “[University] persons must not use data or information to which they have access...in a way that could be detrimental to [the university]” and that “[university] persons must not disclose information to an internal or external person unless necessary in the discharge of their university obligations.” There must be no

¹ *The Economist* 1843 Magazine, May 7, 2024 https://www.economist.com/1843/2024/05/03/its-been-a-very-long-two-weeks-how-the-gaza-protests-changed-columbia?utm_medium=social-media.content.np&utm_source=twitter&utm_campaign=editorial-social&utm_content=discovery.content

² Isidore Rabi, a distinguished faculty member, interrupted Dwight Eisenhower who at the time was President of Columbia, and who had begun a speech on campus by addressing the faculty as "employees of the university."

³ Quoted in Ginsberg, B. (2011) *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 3.

criticism of university persons or the university itself that “harms the reputation of the university.” Indeed, we may well rue the day we hired professional administrators to run the university. As I found in my own case, university administrators sometimes feel that the academic programs of the campus are their property to play around with without faculty or Senate approval or input. This seems natural to the administrators. Senates are largely neutered institutions. The University of Chicago Statement on Academic Freedom states it is essential for a university to be able “to discuss any problem that presents itself...without a vibrant commitment to free and open inquiry, a university ceases to be a university.”⁴ On these criteria, my university has ceased to be a university. In my view, the right of academic faculty, in particular Senators, to speak freely and to question university policy and administration is fundamental to any university. Do universities function by promoting critical and free enquiry and debate? No, not anymore, even if they might have in the past.

The Chilling Effect of Campus Respectful Environment Statements

Respectful environment statements have become instruments that encourage the bullying and mobbing of faculty who criticize other faculty, union staff, university administrators, and the university itself. Criticism of other faculty members, the faculty union and the university administration has become, as I found in my own case, “bullying and harassment” and “disrespect.” As Ginsberg has noted “Faculty members with the temerity to question this state of affairs will, no doubt, be cited for demonstrating a shameful lack of civility”.⁵ I understand that the first amendment of the United States constitution declares that civility is not a precondition for freedom of speech, but in Canada, in a 2015 university arbitration decision, civility was upheld as overriding academic freedom, with respect winning out over freedom of expression.⁶

At my own university, its respectful environment statement, which appeared in 2008 from the administration with no consultation or input from faculty or staff, and which did not go through the normal approval channels for Board of Governors policies, is used to stifle academic debate on campus, and to silence criticism of the administration. I challenged my administration many times, so was mobbed by the administration. Collegiality is now interpreted to mean congeniality; it is now the job of the faculty to agree with the administration lest one be cited for “disrespect.” In my own case I found out that any criticism of my head or dean was “disrespectful.”

⁴ University of Chicago, Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression, 2014 ps 1, 3.
<https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/FOECommitteeReport.pdf>

⁵ Ginsberg, B. (2011) *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why it Matters*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 199.

⁶ University of Saskatchewan v University of Saskatchewan Faculty Association, CanLII 27479 (SK LA) (Arbitrator: Andrew Sims) <https://www.canlii.org/en/sk/skla/doc/2015/2015canlii27479/2015canlii27479.html>

As my university's respectful environment statement states: "Freedom of expression cannot exist without respect for others...in ways that respect the dignity of others ... one person's freedom of expression cannot be allowed to trample...the wellbeing of others." In a letter to me from my provost, she stated: "While all faculty members are free to voice opinions, may I remind you that in doing so, one must take care to avoid accusations or insinuations that impugn the intentions, character and reputation of others." One cannot "taint or stain the reputation or authority of others" and there can be no allowance for "unwanted or disrespectful behaviour" or "unwarranted criticism" with the administration deciding what is unwarranted and disrespectful. My university's human resources department promotes a "Platinum Rule" of the university, superior to a mere Golden Rule: "Treat others in the way they would want to be treated." Or as Forrest Gump's mother told him, if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all.

Respectful environment statements allow human resources officers and senior administrators to prey on faculty members they deem to be disrespectful (i.e. not nice to management) and is the main mobbing tool in the administration's arsenal against faculty and staff. Although the statements usually include formal complaint and investigation procedures, in my own experience there need be no complaints or investigations to be tarred and feathered as disrespectful, bothersome and not nice by deans and provosts. Just from the star chambers and kangaroo courts of their own offices and laptops, with no due process, one can be disciplined and threatened with dismissal for what they deem, as judge, jury and executioner, as disrespectful, not nice, and in violation of university "policy", the so-called policy being actually just a construct solely of human resource departments and administrators, not consulted on or passed through the Senate or the Board of Governors, the normal channels of academic governance. I was so preyed upon in retaliation and reprisal by bringing entirely reasonable and justified complaints and criticisms of my head and deans and for making entirely substantiated allegations of academic misconduct by members of my department. Instead, we must be nice, respectful Stepford faculty. Of course, criticism of the administration cannot exist if administrators have such hypersensitivity that they take all such criticism as personal and disrespectful. Academic freedom is vulnerable if it depends on the interpretation placed by administrators on the remarks of faculty members. Intramural academic freedom requires faculty to play a major role in academic governance, but if they don't speak up, say in the Senate and ask questions, out of fear of reprisal or retaliation from administrators, what value is academic freedom and shared governance? And who decides what criticism is unwarranted or disrespectful? Of course, the Big Brother thought police.

The Professionalization of Faculty Associations and Unions

We should also rue the day we allowed our faculty associations and unions to be run by professional staff rather than by faculty members themselves. In my experience these staff ally themselves with human resources staff, representing management, rather than with the members of the association or union. They go along with management in order to get along with their staff counterparts in human resources, and more often than not take the side of management in disputes. This is what is

referred to as sweetheart unionism. I was targeted, ostracized from my elected union duties, and mobbed by both administrators and union professional staff, all working in complicity and collusion, in order that I would not upset this sweetheart relationship. They all went to extraordinary lengths to keep this relationship intact, with interchangeable letters that I “cease and desist” in helping union members in their problems with the university. My criticisms of this state of affairs was met by the union tarbushing me with no due process whatsoever as a bully and harasser of its staff.

At my university, the union professional staff also like to prey on faculty members who threaten their power, under their own and the university’s respectful environment statements and bullying and harassment policies. So the “all administration” union can also add its weight to the mobbing of individual faculty members, on the side of management. Faculty members cannot criticize the union professional staff. In my university, the union bosses pay themselves over-the-market salaries from member dues and act just like in the movies. The union has the monopoly on representation of the members to the management, and faculty members are completely excluded from handling union matters and affairs. The union fails to insist that the collective agreement is adhered to, and management knows this, so it does whatever it pleases. The mobbed faculty member cannot look to their union for support. The union is just as wedded to the concept of respect and niceness over freedom of expression as university management is, and buys fully, without complaint, into the administration’s respectful environment apparatus of repression. The union at my own university has been completely silent on the mobbing of faculty members under the diktat respectful environment statement of the university. Again, “silence like a cancer grows”.

The Kangaroo Courts of “External” Investigations

In my own experience, and the experience I know of other faculty members at my and other universities, the external investigations so favoured by union and administration, over alternative dispute-handling mechanisms such as mediation, are a further tool used by both in academic mobbing of their faculty member victims. In my own case the “external” investigation was an administrative mobbing tool to use as a cover-up, whitewash, kangaroo court and Star Chamber totalitarian exercise in misinformation, alternative facts, and denial of the truth. It was a massive Kafkaesque personal and professional trial, conviction and defamation of myself, an elected Senator. The fact that the deans, directors and administration were backed up to the hilt by the administration’s investigation, and also that the investigation was deemed fair and proper by my faculty union, confirmed to me that my university and its faculty union was rotten to the core.

The Demise on Campus of the Primacy of the Facts and the Truth

My understanding had always been, and to quote from the Universities Canada Statement on Academic Freedom, that “evidence and truth are the guiding principles for universities...faculty

must be ...free to examine data ...and be guided by evidence”⁷. This is in fact not the case in my own university, as I found out. In my own case, I was told that truth and facts were outside of the terms of reference. It was found that my exposing of minor managerial malfeasance at my university was a vexatious and malicious act. It was deemed a malicious act on my part to argue that I was right and the university wrong. Truth was no defense, just as it is no defense under the university’s respectful environment statement. If it harms anyone’s reputation and is deemed bothersome and not nice by the administration, that is enough to be convicted and mobbed. Truth, fair comment or qualified privilege, the three defenses of defamation in the civil courts, are no defense in the university’s court of deemed disrespect to the administration. There is no defense for defamatory speech at all under university respectful environment statements; one cannot speak Truth to Power. Harvard University, with its motto of “Veritas” should eat its heart out. It no longer matters if what you say is true and correct. This is a totalitarian state of affairs of “shoot the messenger.”

Reading the investigator’s report in my own case, it appears that facts and truth are, in the eyes of the university administration, merely one opinion, a selective choice of data, and a one-sided view. Truth and lies, facts and alternative facts, are deemed to be opposing opinions, and one must consider all views. That is, in order to be fair, and in addition to the truth and the facts, one must also consider alternative facts and alternative truths, in order to obtain a balanced, unbiased view. One must not argue that only one interpretation is the truth, and it is a malicious act to argue other interpretations, but not the truth, are wrong. Apparently I failed to do this in insisting on the true facts, which were downgraded to merely my own opinion. In fact, it appeared in my case that my university could not encounter the truth, just as the Wicked Witch of the West could not encounter water. As evidenced by my own case, my university administration and union were more committed to fabrication, bullying, harassment, intimidation, distortion and innuendo, than to truth and facts. My university had no overriding preference for the truth and the facts. I found out that arguing for the primacy of the truth and the true facts, against the denials of the university administration, was a malicious act.

The Personal Consequences on Mobbing Victims

As a personal toll, in my own case, all of my lifelong-held beliefs and values of truth, facts and evidence were challenged by the fabrications, intimidations and corresponding events. This rendered me quite confused, in a state of personal and professional existential crisis and cognitive disconnect. I did not know quite what, or who, to believe anymore. I no longer had faith and belief, and still do not, in what I thought were the values of a university such as my own, of freedom of inquiry and conclusions based on facts, evidence, and truth. I lost my faith entirely in my own university, and to this day find it mentally destabilizing and actually physically nauseating to set foot on campus, which

⁷ Universities Canada (2011) Statement on Academic Freedom <https://univcan.ca/news/statement-on-academic-freedom/>

I avoid doing. I had thought that universities were places of freedom of speech, and transparency, but my own university is a place where if tenured faculty, including elected Senators, bother and ruffle any feathers in the senior administration or union, they can expect to be academically mobbed, suspended without pay or terminated.

The issues I brought to the attention of the administration and union were not my own problems. I brought them up on behalf of the faculty members and students involved and affected. How is it that conduct such as my own, for example, as an elected Senator exposing and seeking redress for students for a fairly minor bit of administrative fraud and misrepresentation in a fairly minor program in a fairly minor corner of the university can lead to “serious consequences” for myself? The fact that the administrators involved denied everything so vociferously confirmed to be they were all guilty as charged, as confirmed by the evidence later released. They certainly “doth protesteth too much” in their attempted cover-up and suppression of evidence, and academic mobbing of myself, for uncovering and prosecuting the facts. The ultimate personal indignity was that the only defense and excuse I could offer for my behaviour as a faculty member in having a commitment to the truth and the facts and with due diligence carrying out my role as an elected Senator on behalf of faculty and students was either to offer a profuse apology and recant or plead an abnormal medical condition. This is the 1967 Cultural Revolution, 1984, today’s Communist China, Galileo and Socrates all over again.

Conclusion

I do not think university administrations and faculty union officials should continue to mob and shoot the messengers. I think they should begin to address the problems raised, and their large toll on the wellbeing and careers of those involved, and not deny and ignore them. Rather than mobbing me, I would have preferred that my university and faculty union valued my contributions to teaching, research and service over the years, my performance as a engaged professor, my defense of academic freedom and university integrity, and my contributions to my discipline. I am secure in the knowledge that most of the faculty and more or less all of the students who I have ever been in contact with do value these contributions, even if my university, whatever it is, and as expressly demonstrated, doesn’t. I would also have preferred if my university and faculty union had dealt with the many faculty members and students involved in these dramas fairly and decently, which they didn’t, and there can now be no redress for that. However I do feel, for what it is worth, that I secured at least the moral victory in these affairs, and I at least am content in the knowledge that I had the truth and the facts on my side, something my university and union administrators cannot claim to have ever had. But what is the worth of moral victories? I hope that this paper will contribute to the quest to turn these moral victories into real ones in the halls of today’s mob-ruled academia.

Author

Peter Wylie is an independent scholar. He worked for a few years here and there outside of academia, and taught, researched and served for 37 years at various colleges and universities. He obtained tenure at three of these, and experienced academic mobbing as a target at two out of the three. He attributes this to his outspoken nature and unwillingness to tolerate corruption, deception and moral shades of grey, preferring to see things as either right or wrong. He currently serves as the Managing Editor of this journal, and can be contacted at peterwylie789@gmail.com