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Professors' Growing Risk: Harassment for Things They Never Really Said

By Peter Schmidt JUNE 22, 2017

College faculty members can find it challenging enough to deal with the

backlash over a controversial remark. In recent months, however, several have ended up facing a barrage of harassment and death threats in response to statements that they deny ever actually making.

Johnny Eric Williams, an associate professor of sociology at Trinity College, became an extreme example of the phenomenon this week. His employer, a small private institution in Connecticut, ended up [closing the campus](#) on Wednesday in response to threats apparently stemming from an article about him on Campus Reform, a conservative website that [polices academe](#) for perceived liberal bias. Headlined "Prof calls whites 'inhuman assholes,' says 'let them die,'" the [article](#) said Mr. Williams "seemingly endorsed the idea" that the black first responders to last week's [shooting](#) at a congressional baseball game should have done nothing to save the white victims.

Mr. Williams had riffed on a separate, anonymous author's [blog post](#) that made such an argument, but he had never explicitly expressed such a view himself. His own comments on race and law enforcement, he said, were in response to a police officer's [fatal shooting](#) of a black woman in Seattle. It was a distinction without a difference to many who sent Trinity angry emails.

On Thursday, Mr. Williams issued a statement in which he said he had gone into hiding far from the campus for his safety and apologized to Trinity for the "fear and

anxiety" the controversy over his remarks had brought it, the *Hartford Courant* [reported](#).

Professors at several other institutions — including Drexel University, Texas A&M University, and the University of Iowa — have recently found themselves besieged after others' interpretations of their statements went viral.

The nation's college faculty members have long been coming under fire not for statements they actually made, but for views ascribed to them by others, says Hans-Joerg Tiede, a senior program officer in the American Association of University Professors' department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance. Back in the 1930s, for example, William Randolph Hearst's newspaper empire had reporters [pose as students](#) and accused many professors of "radical tendencies" based on remarks taken out of context.

The emergence of the internet and social media made it easier to [quickly spread word](#) of such accusations and orchestrate campaigns demanding that faculty members be disciplined. What's new about the latest controversies, Mr. Tiede says, is the extent to which instructors and their employers are being deluged with threats of various forms of violence, including sexual assault.

The AAUP on Thursday issued a statement condemning the practice, "becoming all too common, of bombarding faculty members and institutions of higher education with threats." It said "threatening messages are likely to stifle free expression and cause faculty and others on campus to self-censor so as to avoid being subjected to similar treatment."

For his part, Sterling C. Beard, editor-in-chief of Campus Reform, said in a statement issued Thursday that his publication stands by its reporting, does not call for the harassment of any of its story subjects, and views the threatening and harassing of people on college campuses as "never acceptable."

"We are simply reporting on what these professors publicly stated; that's our job as a higher-education watchdog," he said.

Among the colleges where faculty members have faced an intense backlash for statements they deny ever making are:

University of Iowa



Courtesy Sarah Bond

Sarah E. Bond, of the U. of Iowa, says her university has been supportive after she became a target of angry emails.

Target: Sarah E. Bond, assistant professor of classics.

The original statement: In an [essay](#) published this month on Hyperallergic, an online forum focused on the arts, Ms. Bond said that many of the marble statues, reliefs, and sarcophagi created in the ancient Western world originally had coats of colored paint that later came off, and that the equation of white marble with beauty is a dangerous construct that continues to influence today's white supremacists and hurt minority members.

The critics' take: Campus Reform summarized Ms. Bond's argument in an [article](#) titled "Prof: 'White Marble' in Artwork Contributes to White Supremacy." It defends the story as accurate and straightforward. She argues that it "remixed" her thought to say white statues are racist in themselves. The story spread to other conservative websites, and Ms. Bond ended up being [barraged](#) with angry emails, many calling for her dismissal.

The institution's response: Ms. Bond told *The Chronicle* that her university has been supportive of her.

Syracuse University

Target: Dana Cloud, professor of communication and rhetorical studies.

The original statement: Ms. Cloud took part in a counterprotest in response to a June 10 "anti-Sharia law" [rally](#) in downtown Syracuse, N.Y. When the other side began to disperse, she [tweeted](#), "We almost have the fascists in on the run. Syracuse people come down to the federal building to finish them off."

The critics' take: In an [article](#) headlined "Professor urges students to 'finish off' anti-Sharia protesters," Campus Reform characterized the tweet as "a veiled call for violence," an interpretation that Ms. Cloud rejects. Other conservative websites picked up the story, bringing a torrent of angry emails and threats. In defending Campus Reform's coverage, Mr. Beard says Ms. Cloud was indeed "calling for violence, even if inadvertently."

The institution's response: Syracuse's office of academic affairs issued a statement condemning any threats against Ms. Cloud and saying she had "clarified that her remarks were not intended to invite or incite violence." More than 1,200 scholars and students at Syracuse and elsewhere have signed an [online statement](#) declaring support for her.

In a separate statement issued by the university on Thursday, Chancellor Kent Syverud said Ms. Cloud's statement "is susceptible to multiple interpretations" but he rejected calls to denounce, censor, or dismiss her. "Free speech is and will remain one of our key values," Mr. Syverud said. "Our faculty must be able to say and write things — including things that provoke some or make others uncomfortable — up to the very limits of the law."

Texas A&M University

Target: Tommy Curry, professor of philosophy.

The original statement: In a 2012 podcast, Mr. Curry, a critical race theorist who has extensively studied militancy as a means of minority self-defense, discussed *Django Unchained*, a film by Quentin Tarantino. In discussing the nation's troubled racial history and arguing that blacks need to take steps to protect themselves against racial violence, he said, "In order to be equal, in order to be liberated, some white people might have to die."

The critics' take: *The American Conservative* dug up the podcast and characterized Mr. Curry's comments as "racist bilge" in a May 8 [article](#) titled "When Is It OK to Kill Whites?" Mr. Curry and many of his supporters say the publication took his statements out of context, an assertion backed by the fact-checking website Snopes in its recent [examination](#) of the controversy. Nevertheless, Mr. Curry has been barraged with racist emails, calls for his dismissal, and threats.

The institutions' response: Michael K. Young, the university's president, initially distanced himself from Mr. Curry, issuing a [statement](#) that called the professor's comments about race and violence "disturbing" and "in stark contrast to Aggie core values." In a separate [statement](#) issued a week later, he expressed regret to those who

thought his earlier remarks had disparaged the professor's work, said scholars "often find our comments misunderstood," and affirmed his "unwavering support for academic freedom."

Drexel University



Mark Makela for The Chronicle

George Ciccariello-Maher, of Drexel U., says he's the subject of a university investigation after remarks he tweeted stirred outrage.

Target: George Ciccariello-Maher, associate professor of politics and global studies.

The original statement: On December 24, Mr. Ciccariello-Maher posted on Twitter: "All I Want for Christmas is White Genocide." He says the post [satirized references](#) to "white genocide" by hate groups and white supremacists in their opposition to interracial marriage and racial-diversity efforts.

The critics' take: Conservative Web sites such as [Breitbart](#) missed the joke, characterizing the tweet as a sincere expression of Mr. Ciccariello-Maher's views and as evidence of higher-education's leftist militancy.

The institution's response: Drexel [initially condemned](#) the professor's comments as "utterly reprehensible" and "deeply disturbing." It subsequently said it supports his right to free speech but his attempt at humor missed and his tweets do not represent its values. His troubles there continue: Drexel began a review of his conduct after he subsequently tweeted, in April, about wanting to vomit at the sight of an airline passenger giving up a first-class seat for a uniformed soldier. In an email Thursday, he said he remains under investigation there for several of his Twitter posts, and sees the undertaking as a violation of his rights as a professor.

Peter Schmidt writes about affirmative action, academic labor, and issues related to academic freedom. Contact him at peter.schmidt@chronicle.com.

Correction (6/23/2017, 11:33 a.m.): This article originally provided an incorrect title for Mr. Williams. He is an associate professor, not an assistant professor. The article has been updated to reflect this correction.