

An assault on free speech

Trinity College suspends professor over Facebook posts

Josh Varlin
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In a chilling attack on academic freedom, Trinity College has suspended Professor Johnny Eric Williams following Facebook posts he made regarding race relations in the United States. Williams has taught sociology at the small private liberal arts college in Hartford, Connecticut since 1996.

Williams was targeted by a right-wing media campaign after he shared articles and posts on Facebook dealing with issues of racism and white supremacy. This campaign, which misrepresented his views, inspired violent threats against both Williams personally and Trinity College, causing the campus to shut down on June 21. Williams and his family left the state of Connecticut due to the death threats.

In a cowardly capitulation to this campaign, Trinity College President Joanne Berger-Sweeney announced on June 26 that Williams had been placed on leave, without any faculty review. “The review by the Dean of the Faculty of the events concerning Professor Williams will continue,” her announcement stated, while making a boilerplate commitment to “engage in conversations” about academic freedom and the use of social media.

This statement came five days after a letter from the president devoted almost entirely to attacking Williams for his social media posts.

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has opposed the campaign against Williams and characterized both the threats against Williams and his suspension as attacks on academic freedom. In an email to *Inside Higher Ed*, Henry Reichman, the chair of the AAUP’s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure, bluntly called Berger-Sweeney’s June 26 statement announcing Williams’ suspension “one of

the most mealy-mouthed statements I’ve ever read.”

Reichman continued: “What on earth does ‘we must be able to engage in conversations about these difficult and complex issues’ mean? Conversations about race, like the one in which [Williams] was participating on social media (and not in his capacity as a Trinity faculty member)? Or the conversations about academic freedom and freedom of speech to which Berger-Sweeney refers? These freedoms are not simply topics to ‘discuss’ and ‘converse’ about; they are first and foremost principles to defend.”

The use of filthy right-wing media campaigns to shut down critical voices within the academy is a significant threat to academic freedom and democratic rights as a whole. Professors must be able to freely express views, even if they are controversial, unpopular or expressed provocatively.

The lies and threats directed at Williams and Trinity College’s acquiescence to the campaign sends a chilling message to professors: Express a controversial opinion or make a provocative statement in the classroom or on social media and you may face threats and unemployment, potentially with the collaboration of your institution.

The statements made by Williams in no way justify the actions taken against him. Williams shared an article from the blog *Medium* with the provocative headline, “Let Them Fucking Die” on June 16. The *Medium* piece begins by quoting an article pointing out that House Majority Whip Rep. Steve Scalise, who was shot in the attack on the Republican congressional baseball team practice, has ties with white supremacists and opposes LGBTQ rights but was saved by a black Capitol Police officer who is married to another

woman.

Williams later posted on June 18 expressing his own anger, adding the hashtag “#LetThemFuckingDie,” an apparent reference to the *Medium* piece he had shared earlier.

Right-wing news sites such as the *Washington Times* and the *Blaze* smeared Williams, painting him as someone who was “calling white people ‘inhuman a-holes’ who need to ‘die’” (*Washington Times*).

However, there is no indication in his posts that he was calling for violence against whites or even agreeing with the *Medium* post’s contention that minorities should show “indifference to [bigots’] well-being.”

Williams has apologized for his posts and denied that he was inciting violence. He said in an email to the college that his “only aim was to bring awareness to white supremacy and to inspire others to address these kinds of injustices.”

Williams has been suspended before any investigation. Williams’ lawyer, Todd Steigman, characterized the decision by Trinity College’s leadership to place Williams on leave as a “further violation of his constitutional rights concerning free speech and academic freedom, as well as a breach of his contractual and due process rights.”

While the Trinity College leadership has been spineless, Williams has received broad support from those opposed to the attack on free speech. A Google Docs petition urging Berger-Sweeney to defend Williams against threats has received almost 700 signatures as of this writing, mostly Trinity College faculty, students and alumni, as well as other academics. A separate Change.org petition has received almost 3,000 signatures as of this writing.

According to the Hartford-based *Courant*, “a forum of about 60 Trinity faculty passed a resolution Wednesday that demanded that the administration revoke its decision.”



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