

Editorial: PSU affair raises questions of academic freedom

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People worried about what they see as an increasingly hostile attitude toward unconventional opinions and viewpoints on college campuses may want to keep an eye on an affair unfolding at Portland State University.

A PSU political science professor named Bruce Gilley is under investigation by the university in a probe that appears to be linked to a paper he wrote for an academic journal, *Third World Quarterly*. (The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which reported on the story last month, called *Third World Quarterly* an "obscure but respected" journal.)

In his paper, titled "The Case for Colonialism," Gilley advanced a decidedly unpopular opinion (and one that is not held by many of his colleagues): He came to the defense of colonialism, arguing that it actually had improved many lives, whereas "a century of anticolonial regimes and policies" had taken a "grave human toll."

You expect an argument like that to stir up some controversy, and subsequent events more than lived up to that expectation: According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, both Gilley and the journal drew heavy criticism. A petition urging the journal to retract the article collected more than 10,000 signatures. Fifteen members of the journal's editorial board resigned. (Interestingly, linguist, social critic and noted leftist Noam Chomsky, who remains on the journal's editorial board, publicly defended Gilley.)

After the editor of the journal received death threats, Gilley agreed to withdraw the article.

To be fair: Some of the critics of Gilley's paper said they were not as upset about its contents as they were about the overall quality of the piece. The *Chronicle* reported that one such critic called the paper "the academic equivalent of a Trump tweet, clickbait with footnotes."

Maybe that's true. But it also could be that the Gilley paper challenged the conventional wisdom at a time when some say academia is increasingly intolerant toward conservative thought.

In that light, consider what happened when word got out about the paper at Portland State: The university issued a statement saying that it "does not endorse the viewpoint of Professor Gilley's article," but affirming "the right of all our faculty to explore scholarship and to speak, write, and publish a variety of viewpoints and conclusions."

Gilley was underwhelmed by the university's support: "Basically, their support for an academic conducting research who was being attacked by totalitarian ideologues was, 'Sorry, we can't fire this guy.' In my view, that was disgraceful." (You get the sense that the professor isn't one to shy away from a fight.)

But the dust has not yet settled at Portland State: The university's diversity office is investigating a discrimination complaint filed against Gilley. Portland State officials confirmed the investigation, but declined to provide details. "The university is obligated to investigate any claims of discrimination and harassment made by students, faculty and staff," a university spokesman said in a written statement. "This investigation is not politically motivated, nor is it an investigation of the article."

Gilley isn't buying it: He told the Chronicle that the investigation is a "gross abuse of process" that was "entirely motivated by my article." He said the investigation has stretched out for four months.

Unless Portland State investigators have evidence of harassment and discrimination that goes beyond the article, there's no reason for the probe to continue.

And there's the potential for real damage should it drag on. As two graduates of Portland State argued in an opinion piece this week in *The Oregonian*, the investigation "sends the troubling message that the university is no place for those who dare to think differently or question accepted conventional wisdom."

We need our colleges and universities to be places where students and professors can engage in wide-ranging and free debate and discussion of ideas, regardless of where they land across the ideological spectrum. Anything less amounts to a betrayal of their core mission.