

## Portland State investigation puts academic freedom on ice

By Andrew Downs and Justin Brecht

*Oregon Live*, 18 April 2018

Last month, it was reported that Portland State University political science professor Dr. Bruce Gilley was under investigation by the university for discrimination after he published a paper challenging certain accepted opinions on colonialism. The university's investigation into Gilley is shameful, anti-academic and illiberal. The mission of the university is supposed to be about challenging the status quo and fostering an environment where ideas can be shared and debated. PSU leaders' choice to punish Gilley for doing just that should be gravely concerning to all Oregonians.

As a public university, PSU is a creature of the state. The principles of academic freedom, not to mention the law, prohibit the very targeted state-sponsored speech suppression we are witnessing here. The public has a compelling interest in ensuring that public universities maintain an environment where professors are not merely free -- but also feel free -- to research, communicate and debate a diverse range of topics.

Through the free flow of ideas, we expose college students to new concepts that challenge their preexisting views on the world. This process serves the important purpose of helping to equip future leaders with the ability to think critically and make rational choices. Without a diverse debate within our universities, students are deprived of the best and most intellectually rigorous works that the academy could otherwise offer. Without this freedom, our campuses become places that hinder dynamism and promote tribalism and group-think.

The investigation is also concerning because it chills future acts of academic independence by junior or aspiring academics. It sends the troubling message that the university is no place for those who dare to think differently or question accepted conventional wisdom. This is indicative of an unhealthy academic culture that betrays the school's promise to uphold classically held liberal values like freedom of speech and expression -- the bedrock principles upon which our democratic institutions were built.

If university leaders felt compelled to abuse their authority in this way, how can we be sure they are not practicing even subtler forms of intellectual suppression in their hiring and firing practices, in their promotion processes, or in their funding decisions?

We hope the Board of Trustees feels compelled to address this alarming situation and explain what active measures it intends to take to strengthen the university's culture of academic freedom. PSU traditionally has been an institution with a reputation for openness, diversity and inclusion. The Board must demonstrate that the university is still that place.

*Andrew Downs and Justin Brecht are both graduates of Portland State University's Hatfield School of Government. Downs is an attorney living in Portland, and Brecht is a combat veteran who lives in Salem*