

311. Cash-Strapped Halifax University Hires an Advisory Firm for Snitch Line

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Mark Mercer
sergechestnut@gmail.com

Anonymous complaint lines place authorities between individuals who live or work together, and this makes honest and collegial relations dangerous and difficult. They create institutional cultures in which people are guarded, insincere and fearful. And they encourage people to feign vulnerability and neediness.

For all those reasons, an institution should consider setting up an anonymous complaint line only when that institution is rife with corruption and malfeasance, and something's got to be done quickly to stop the rot. I don't think that that's the situation at Saint Mary's University. Our middle-sized Halifax institution has not made headlines for unbridled pilfering, fraudulent research or abusing students.

And yet, despite our fortunate lack of rampant evil, the Board of Governors at Saint Mary's has hired an accounting firm, Grant Thornton, to run a "Confidential Anonymous Reporting System." Students, staff members and professors may use the system "to report any unacceptable behaviour anonymously, and in total confidence." And the board has done this at a time when deans tell professors to use less paper and to hire fewer test graders, because there's so little money around these days.

Saint Mary's certainly does have problems, problems it shares with many other universities. There's a lot of fear at Saint Mary's. Many of us are leery of speaking freely, candidly or openly. Students and professors engage in self-censorship, we are coerced by rules and expectations into conformity, and no one dares speak controversial ideas.

Over the past decade or so, professors and students at various universities have been called to disciplinary or conflict-resolution meetings for speaking certain words, for showing art that features Mohammed, for using the expression "girls and boys," for challenging official doctrine regarding the Indian Residential Schools, for stating that Hamas is a terrorist organization, and on and on. These are now the sorts of things that count as "unacceptable behaviour." And the anonymity of complainants, even when maintaining it compromises fairness toward the accused, has rarely been violated.

The complaining students, professors and staff members whom administrators should be telling to go pound sand instead get their meritless complaints taken seriously, and good and innocent students and professors find themselves called on the carpet or worse.

Much of the fear at universities today stems from the changing meaning of “respect.” University people used to be concerned to respect each other’s desire and willingness to think for themselves. To treat someone with disrespect was to presume them unable to hear your honest thoughts. Lack of candour and insincerity were the central forms disrespect took. University people would be appalled were someone to refrain from speaking a thought out of “respect” for a black colleague’s heritage.

Nowadays, respect is respect not for minds but for feelings or identities. The two notions of respect often conflict, for in order to protect or affirm someone’s feelings or identity, one might have to avoid saying what one means, which, in the first sense of “respect,” is precisely what it is to be disrespectful.

Few members of the academic leadership at Saint Mary’s have a strong commitment to the academic mission of our institution or to the academic values (freedom of expression, academic freedom, openness, candour, criticism, disputation, individuality, collegiality, respect in the first sense) that sustain that mission. A snitch line will aggravate our problems, not alleviate any of them.

We’re assured in official documents that we don’t have to worry about facing complaints that are malicious, frivolous or vexatious. Those who handle the snitch line will weed out false complaints. But given that academic administrators at Saint Mary’s have themselves been unable to resist acting on wrong-headed or bad-faith complaints, how likely is it that an accounting firm will stand up for academic values?

Academic administrators should be incensed that one of their functions, receiving and evaluating complaints, has been outsourced. Guarding one’s hold on that function would matter dearly to anyone keen to protect and promote academic values.

I hope that professors at Saint Mary’s will continue to try their best to be good academics, bold and candid in their discussion and teaching, despite all the institutional pressures on them not to be. I hope they will continue to encourage their students to develop their intellectual and moral autonomy and to treat others at Saint Mary’s as intellectually and morally autonomous agents, despite the risk at which they will put themselves for doing so.

Being an academic, whether as a professor or as a student, has always called for courage. Now that we have a snitch line, if we are to serve the academic mission, we will need even more courage.