

Slang term use lands professor in hot seat

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By Eric Athas/Daily News correspondent
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WALTHAM -

A free speech organization has taken up the cause of a veteran Brandeis University professor who was disciplined by the school for describing the word "wetbacks" in his political science course.

Professor Donald Hindley was teaching a Latin American politics course last fall, when he told students the word "wetbacks" is a derogatory term used to describe immigrants from Mexico, according to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education.

"Professor Hindley is a respected scholar who until now has not faced a single student complaint in nearly five decades of teaching," foundation president Greg Lukianoff said on the group's Web site. "Punishing him for actually criticizing the use of what is often considered an ethnic slur shows a mindless application of 'sensitivity at all costs' at the expense of freedom of expression."

At least one student in that class informed Director of Employment Jesse Simone, who began investigating. The school said Hindley's remarks violated its harassment policy.

Hindley yesterday declined to go into detail about the accusations, saying there's "a legal affair still hanging over."

"I'm in trouble, because I am outspoken," said Hindley, who has been a professor for almost 50 years. "My lips are sealed ... With the new semester beginning, I have to stay focused on that stuff."

University officials conducted a probe and determined that Hindley's conduct was "inappropriate, racial and discriminatory," according to an Oct. 20, 2007, letter to Hindley from Marty Krauss, provost and senior vice president for academic affairs.

The letter says a Brandeis official was told to monitor the remainder of Hindley's classes last semester. Hindley was also ordered to attend anti-discrimination training, which the letter states was paid for by the university.

Krauss wrote that if Hindley did not take steps to correct his conduct, he could be fired.

"This is a personnel matter, and the university does not comment on personnel matters," said Dennis Nealon, a spokesman for Brandeis. "It is important to keep the confidentiality of this issue protected."

Shortly after Hindley was punished, an anonymous person on the campus contacted the Foundation for

Individual Rights in Education, said Adam Kissel, director of the individual rights defense program at the organization.

"We talked with the professor ... it made a lot of sense as a (foundation) issue," said Kissel. "It's a serious assault on academic freedom when you put a monitor in a classroom."

Kissell said a monitor has not been placed in any of Hindley's classes so far this semester.

The education foundation said the university's actions overstepped campus procedures and violated Hindley's rights as a professor. According to the organization, Hindley "has neither been granted a formal hearing by Brandeis nor provided with the substance of the accusations against him in writing."

Following the student's complaint, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education said Hindley was questioned by Simone on Oct. 22, but wasn't informed of the substance of the complaint.

Simone then forwarded her findings to Krauss "the next day without giving Hindley a chance to make final comments and clarifications - a right promised in Brandeis's policies," the foundation said. Hindley was sent the letter from Krauss days later.

The Brandeis Faculty Senate held an emergency meeting Nov. 8 to discuss the reprimands placed on Hindley, according to a copy of the meeting minutes. The senate concluded it was concerned with the actions taken by the university.

Professor Marc Brettler, chairman of the Faculty Senate, said the case is still pending and wouldn't comment on anything other than what has been officially released by the senate.

"The human resources policies stress the importance of resolving such issues in an 'informal manner' with 'flexible' solutions," reads the minutes from the November Faculty Senate session. "Furthermore, the Provost's letter to the professor includes reference to 'termination' as a possibility if the professor does not accept the suggested remedies."

The Committee on Faculty Rights and Responsibilities also released several statements after Hindley filed an appeal with the committee. The first report called for Krauss's decision to be "entirely withdrawn." The committee found that the punishment violated Hindley's rights as a professor and that the discipline was excessive.

Some students at Brandeis have been chatting about the issue and questioned the actions the university took in punishing Hindley.

"I definitely think it's something that's talked about on campus, at least within my circle of friends," said Lily Swartz, a senior sociology major. "The main debate is more focused on the steps the university took."

Swartz went on to say that it's also not a bad idea for professors on campus to re-examine the language they use while teaching.

"A lot of people were talking about it last semester," said Brittany Christensen, a junior psychology major. Christensen said a few of her friends are political science majors and had a monitor sit in on their classes.

"They just kind of felt bad for (Hindley)," she said.

Sophomore economics major Gordon Millner had heard about Hindley's alleged word usage, but doesn't think the campus is up in arms over the ordeal. "The feeling is that it's not that big of a deal," said Millner.