

Sociology Professor Sanctioned for Class on Prostitution at University of Colorado Boulder

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Why is it that every time sex enters the conversation in academia, harassment always appears to shadow it? How perverse – and unfair to real victims of harassment - that this serious charge is used against a professor for nothing else than creatively doing her job. In a lecture on prostitution, a highlight of her regular course on deviance, University of Colorado Boulder sociology professor Patricia Adler had volunteer teaching assistants role play sex workers in different economic and social situations.

According to *Inside Higher Ed*:

During the lecture, Adler talks with [the undergraduate teaching assistants in character] about such issues as their backgrounds, “how they got into the business,” how much they charge, the services they perform, and the risks they face of violence, arrest and AIDS. The class is a mix of lecture and discussion, just like most classes, she said.

Using role-play to teach about social issues could be a successful teaching technique that one can imagine being used to teach about the experience of any social group with which students are unlikely to have direct contact from sweatshop workers to disabled athletes and, yes, also prostitutes.

Following the lecture, however, Adler was suspended from teaching her popular class, and, according to her, forced her out of a tenured position teaching sociology.

Responding to an outcry from faculty and students, CU Boulder Provost Russell L. Moore issued a statement saying:

Academic freedom protects faculty who teach controversial and uncomfortable/unpopular subjects. However, academic freedom does not allow faculty members to violate the university’s sexual harassment policy by creating a hostile environment for their teaching assistants, or for their students attending the class.

UC Boulder officials claim that “concerns” from anonymous students were voiced to the administration about how student teaching assistants faced negative consequences if they did not volunteer, and how some students were uncomfortable with the overall environment of the lecture. OK, discomfort, perhaps: sex work is probably not discussed in many student homes and trying to understand those society demonizes may be discomfoting, after all you don’t go to college to be comforted. But harassment??

According to Adler, the dean of College of Arts and Sciences, Steven Leigh, told her that her lecture posed “too much risk...in a post-Penn State environment.” Using the prism of criminal systematic sexual abuse to evaluate a teaching method, no matter how controversial it may be,

is, how shall I put it, sheer hysteria.

But tempted as one is to shake one's head and lament the state of U.S. academia, this is a scary development. If a class utilizing role-play to explore social, economic and political issues around sex work can be cast as sexual harassment, then Patricia Adler's situation signals a far broader and greater danger to academic freedom.

And, if you think this is just one error in one university, note that it follows Villanova's 2012 cancellation of Tim Miller's artist-in-residency workshop, due to complaints about how Miller's performance pieces address sexuality; the removal, in 2011, of Northwestern professor J. Michael Bailey from teaching his Human Sexuality course because he allowed an after-class session where two non-students demonstrated the use of an automated sex toy, and the ousting of Gene Nicol as President of the College of William & Mary in 2008 apparently in retaliation for his defense of the campus visit of the touring Sex Workers' Art Show.

Many of Adler's students, however, are very publicly rallying around her. A Change.org petition showing support for her remaining at the university has reached over 2700 signatures, and students and faculty are speaking up on Facebook. Hopefully the University will hear.

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