

Duke Divinity professor disciplined amid diversity training complaint

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue

Duke Divinity School has taken disciplinary action against a professor who wrote in an email to all faculty that a racial equity training event they had been encouraged to attend was “definitively anti-intellectual” and had “totalitarian tendencies.”

When the conflict became public, someone at the divinity school sent the full text of several emails and images of printed letters to Rod Dreher at the American Conservative, who in turn [published them on his blog](#).

Anathea Portier-Young, associate professor of Old Testament, on behalf of the Faculty Diversity and Inclusion Standing Committee, invited her colleagues to the equity training event in March, paid for and hosted by the school, saying that “we hope that this will be a first step in a longer process of working to ensure that DDS is an institution that is both equitable and anti-racist in its practices and culture.”

The Racial Equity Institute says on its website that it offers the training to help “leaders and organizations who want to proactively understand and address racism, both in their organization and in the community where the organization is working.”

Paul J. Griffiths, professor of Catholic theology, in an email replying to all, “in the interests of free exchange,” said: “I exhort you not to attend this training. It’ll be, I predict with confidence, intellectually flaccid: there’ll be bromides, clichés, and amen-corner rah-rahs in plenty.”

He went on to compare the training to communist reeducation of intellectuals by “bureaucrats and apparatchiks.” He also wrote that the training was a distraction from the faculty’s mission to think, “read, write, and teach about the triune Lord of Christian confession.”

Elaine Heath, dean of the divinity school, then weighed in to support the event as “increasing our school’s intellectual strength, spiritual vitality, and moral authority,” before reproving use of the faculty email list to make disparaging statements.

“The use of mass emails to express racism, sexism, and other forms of bigotry is offensive and unacceptable,” she wrote. “As St. Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, regardless of how exquisite our gifts are, if we do not exercise them with love our words are just noise.”

Griffiths then wrote to his colleagues again, releasing the message on social media, saying that two disciplinary proceedings had been instituted against him, one by Heath and the other by Portier-Young through the university’s Office for Institutional Equity. The latter complaint charged Griffiths with harassment through “racist and/or sexist speech,” creating a hostile workplace. Griffiths wrote that the action by Heath and Portier-Young “shows totalitarian affinities in its preferred method, which is the veiled use of institutional power. They appeal to non- or anti-intellectual categories (‘unprofessional conduct’ in Heath’s case; ‘harassment’ in Portier-Young’s) to short-circuit disagreement.”

Citing the confidentiality of personnel issues, Michael Schoenfeld, Duke University vice president for public affairs and government relations, declined to provide details, including on whether or not Griffiths has resigned. As of the time of publication, Griffiths had not responded to confirm or deny reports that he would be leaving Duke at the end of the 2017–2018 academic year.

Heath had written in a March 10 letter to Griffiths that the disciplinary process had been initiated in response to Griffiths’s refusal to meet with her and the dean of the faculty, as well as his “inappropriate behavior in faculty meetings over the past two years.”

The letter also informed Griffiths that he was no longer permitted to attend faculty or committee meetings, except those for students he is advising, and that as long as he refused to meet with administrators he would lose travel and research funds.

[Inside Higher Ed interviewed Hans-Joerg Tiede](#), senior program officer for academic freedom, tenure, and governance at the American Association of University Professors. Although the association does not have a role in the Griffiths case, Tiede said it is an administration’s responsibility to prove its case at a hearing before a faculty committee before banning a professor from faculty meetings.

Heath’s statement about the events reads, in part: “We believe that all faculty have a right to speak out as members of a civil academic community, and if all voices are to be heard, diverse perspectives must be valued and protected.”

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