

Digging Up Dirt on The Soc/Anth Dept.

By Jennifer Caseley

Twenty years ago the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Prince Edward Island started to have problems between faculty members. The result of these problems was the implementation of a rotating departmental chair wherein each member of the department would hold the position of chair for a period of twelve months. This rotation of 'power' was supposed to eliminate problems of authority within the department. This new initiative however, did not do what was hoped.

In an external study of the department conducted in 1991, it was recommended by Pieter de Vries, Chair of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology for Concordia University that the department move to a three-year term for the departmental chair, and that the department look externally for such a chair.

Finally in the spring of 1995, Dr. Satadal Dasgupta, a tenured professor at UPEI, entered into his three-year rotation as chair.

Professors at UPEI have been known to merely shake their heads when hearing of the antics going on in the Soc/Anth Department, but perhaps it is time the University's administration take a closer look at what is really going on.

The stories below represent a few of the problems the department of Sociology/Anthropology has had since the fall of 1995. The names of most of the students have been changed because they fear retribution from their professors.

"Rules of Conduct"

Rachel MacDonald* didn't understand one of the concepts presented to her in class so she asked for help. That was Rachel's first mistake.

Rachel is a manic depressive and the course of events leading up to her breakdown have caused some concern for the students at the University of Prince Edward Island.

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In the fall of 1995 Rachel was enrolled in Anthropology 201 (Cultural Anthropology). Part of the course work involved an essay question on the concept of culture. Confused by the question, Rachel approached her professor, Dr. Holbrook for help. Still unsure of the concept Rachel then approached a second professor in the Sociology/Anthropology department for help. Dr. Wolf offered his view on the subject and lent Rachel two books on the subject.

After his meeting with Rachel, Wolf was approached by Holbrook who stated that Wolf's "behaviour constituted an unwarranted intrusion into his class, and as such, was both unprofessional and uncollegial."

On the afternoon of October 31, 1995 Rachel once again sought Wolf's help. According to Rachel, Holbrook had given her a failing mark because she had asked another professor for help.

No where in the rules of the university does it state that a student may not seek help from another professor.

According to a letter Wolf wrote to Dr. Elizabeth Epperly, President of UPEI in

March of 1996, he had had a meeting with Dr. Satadal Dasgupta, Chair of the Sociology/Anthropology Department, where Dasgupta had asked Wolf to divorce himself from the concerns of Rachel MacDonald.

In the Sociology/Anthropology departmental meeting held November 1, 1995 "Holbrook reported an item he viewed as both individual and immediate concern: the fact that one of his students had sought and received guidance writing a paper for Holbrook, from a professor in Soc-Anth in lieu of Holbrook, without indication to Holbrook. After some discussion, it was agreed that each professor contribute rules for professional conduct to be considered at a future meeting."

The whole ordeal was more than Rachel could handle and within two weeks of receiving a mark of 49% on a paper, her manic depression took over and she was hospitalised. Rachel felt she had failed because she had dared ask another professor for help. The stress of the ordeal was too much for her-she suffered a mental breakdown.

Two of the student reps at the meeting that discussed whether or not it is appropriate for a student to ask another professor for help wrote letters to the President of the university to voice their concern over the "student rules of conduct". One rep felt that Holbrook had tried to force his views on her and that she did not think it "...democratic, for Holbrook to present his case and demand something be done about it without having heard from Prof. Wolf, the other professor involved, and Rachel MacDonald, the student."

The second student rep at the meeting felt that these

'rules of conduct' "would infringe on students' academic freedom."

According to Michael Drake, a third Soc/Anth student who was at the meeting, the rules never surfaced. Drake said that the student reps who were at the meeting discussed their views with the professors and so the idea to form rules was dropped. When asked if there were any problems in the department Drake responded that "if there was any problem within the department, believe me, I would tell you about it."

"Missed Exam"

Unfortunately for students in the department of Sociology/Anthropology this was not the only incident of concern. The final examination for Anthropology 211 scheduled for Thursday, December 14, 1995 never took place. The professor did not show up.

[there is a] history of some difficulty within the department.

Students showed up for the exam only to find that there was no professor, no proctor, and no exam. After twenty minutes calls were placed to the secretary of the department but she was not in and there was no call forwarding in place; so students left the exam room and went to the registrars office where they were told to go home and that someone would contact them.

One student relates the phone call her parents received from Dasgupta, the Chair of the Department, in a letter to President Epperly. The student who asked that her name

not be mentioned until her graduation from the university, stated that the phone call left her parents visibly upset and believing that if she did not just agree to what ever terms Dr. Dasgupta suggested, that he could compromise her graduation in some manner. The student further states that she was furious with Dasgupta's actions, "I believe that as an adult any options or comments...should have been directed to me not my elderly parents. I have always been under the assumption that the contract is between this University and myself..."

Although Dr. Epperly did call and apologize the next day, the student felt that the apology should have come from Dasgupta, not the President of the University.

This letter is not the only letter of complaint that the President has received from a student in the Soc/Anth department. In a letter to the President from Martha Martinic*, a student rep for the department, Martinic states that "We [students] are very troubled about the professional, or should I say, unprofessional conduct of certain professors. The politicking and personal vendettas between professors within the sociology/anthropology department is affecting the students."

The issue of Rachel MacDonald as well as her opinion of the "student rules of conduct" as an intrusion on students academic freedom, were also referred to by Martinic.

Also in her letter to Epperly, Martinic mentioned that "[I] strongly believe that the only way we can begin to repair this departments repu

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