Heated arguments among Mount Royal University faculty after instructor’s op-ed opposing diversity

By Brennan Doherty Star Calgary
Sun., Sept. 8, 2019


CALGARY — A widely-condemned opinion piece by a Mount Royal University instructor arguing against the merits of a diverse society is prompting heated discussions among the university’s faculty.

Yet it remains unclear whether sessional instructor Mark Hecht could face repercussions as a result of the op-ed, published in the Vancouver Sun with the headline “Can Social Trust and Diversity Exist?” It argued low ethnic diversity is the hallmark of countries with high rates of social cohesion, such as Denmark, and suggested Canada follow suit. The op-ed was later yanked post-publication from the websites of the Vancouver Sun and Province, although it ran in the Sun’s weekend print edition.

Mount Royal University itself said it understood the concerns of community members over the op-ed’s publication. It described itself, in a Saturday statement, as a place for free expression and a diverse learning environment.
“The ideas expressed in this newspaper op-ed, while protected by freedom of expression, do not represent my personal views, nor the position of Mount Royal University as a whole,” said Jonathan Withey, the dean of Mount Royal’s faculty of science and technology, in the statement.

Hecht is a sessional instructor at Mount Royal University who teaches urban geography, biogeography and human geography. According to his personal website, he formerly worked as a habitat management supervisor and holds a master’s degree in city planning from the University of Manitoba.

In 2016, he self-published a book titled *The Rules of Invasion: Why Europeans naturally invaded the New World*, which argued ecological factors shaped the ability of various civilizations to invade other countries. His personal website said his current writing is shifting into the realm of “fiction, migration, and geopolitics.”

Hecht told Star Calgary in an email Sunday afternoon his job at Mount Royal is uncertain at the moment, but didn’t have more details. He declined to comment further.

The Mount Royal Faculty Association requires members to uphold the values of diversity, equity and human rights. President Melanie Peacock said the association stands behind that mission statement.

“We honour and respect the principles and concepts of free speech,” she said Sunday. “That said, as a faculty association, we acknowledge that one member does not speak for the entire academic body or reflect the beliefs and the value system of the faculty association.”

Peacock said the association will be discussing the situation over the next several days. She has not spoken to Hecht about the op-ed — and
won’t unless a faculty member brings forward a formal complaint. As of Sunday, she said, that hadn’t happened.

Debate swirled not only on Twitter and other social media platforms, but also on a closed Facebook group for Mount Royal faculty members. Peacock confirmed the discussion was heated and included both supporters and opponents of the op-ed’s publication.

Part of the dilemma, Peacock explained, is whether or not the op-ed is covered under the principles of academic freedom. The concept came about as a means to allow scholars to pursue or critique controversial topics without risk of losing their positions. Except it isn’t clean-cut: disagreements exist within the academic community over whether this freedom applies just to a scholar’s particular field, or all scholarly material entirely.

“There’s not one simple definition of academic freedom,” she said.

What complicates the matter further, Peacock explained, is the fact Hecht’s piece is not a piece of scholarly writing published in an academic journal. In her opinion, the whole issue revolves around freedom of speech — not academic freedom.

Sean Holman, an associate professor of journalism at Mount Royal University and former Vancouver Sun reporter, publicly tweeted that he was “deeply disturbed” the op-ed was published.

“Judging by social media, I think many of my colleagues were similarly troubled by this op-ed,” Holman said in a series of messages with Star Calgary.

He disagreed with the notion that the op-ed’s publication was a free-speech issue. Instead, Holman framed it as a journalistic one. Editors
at a newspaper such as the Sun are not required to run every piece they receive.

“Everyone, including academics, have a right to their own opinion in a democratic society, no matter how much we may disagree with it,” he wrote. “But the news media is not a common carrier. We have a right to determine what we should and should not broadcast or publish.”

In Hecht’s case, the Vancouver Sun’s removal of his op-ed did not stop him from making his argument. On Saturday, the day editor-in-chief Harold Munro apologized to the Sun’s readers, the Mount Royal sessional instructor posted the op-ed in full on his personal website.

Brennan Doherty is a work and wealth reporter with Star Calgary. Follow him on Twitter: @bren_doherty