

Privacy policies problematic for Ontario postsecondaries

LAURA CARLSON
The Cord Weekly

WATERLOO, ONT (CUP)—Universities in Ontario have been brought under a provincial privacy act that gives students the right to keep their names private, and places new constraints on everything from attendance forms to how marks are posted.

Communication Studies professor Dr Gregory Cameron, at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, recognizes the effect the legislation has on his job.

Although he agreed that “government employees can’t be the vehicle by which other people would get information,” he said it’s causing major inconveniences in the classroom.

“In order for [professors] to do our job, we have to know what students’ names are,” Cameron said. “If [the privacy law] is impairing our ability to do our job, we’ll have to be exempted.”

Effective 10 June, universities were brought under the Province’s Freedom

of Information and Privacy Act. Although the legislation has been in place for over 18 years, universities had never been required to fully comply.

Under the act, several provisions outline the way both professors and students are able to conduct themselves in a university setting.

“The act ensures that [personal information] can’t be given to everybody else when you don’t want it out there,” said John Metcalfe, Laurier’s new privacy officer.

To guarantee such protection, students have the right to keep their names private from others. This prohibits university administration and staff, without consent, from publicly displaying any documents that contain a student’s name.

As a result, a list of individuals who have student loans available for pick up can’t be posted, and students can’t find other students on the e-mail directory.

Professors are also not allowed to post marks, nor are they permitted to create a pile for students to pick up assignments.

It’s also recommended that

professors refer to students by their first names. Students cannot be asked to sign an attendance sheet that lists both first and last names.

While Laurier University is still looking into what exactly it can and can’t do, Metcalfe said, “We’ve identified things that aren’t good practices. Like all laws, there is an evolution in how it’s applied.”

Metcalfe also said that the Act can be difficult to uphold in a university setting.

“A university is a community of learners. You come to university not to be anonymous, but to explore your identity. [The Act] isn’t a perfect fit with this.”

Bob Spence, from the provincial office of General Information and Privacy Commission, explained that Ontario’s privacy commissioner has been pushing for this legislation to be put into effect at universities for several years now.

“The act is not new,” said Spence. “It has been implemented at colleges in Ontario and universities in other provinces for years, and it’s just natural for [Ontario] universities to follow.”

Report calls for changes to sexual harassment policy at Memorial U

SHEENA GOODYEAR
The Muse

ST JOHN’S, NFLD (CUP)—A report conducted in response to allegations of an unsupportive and unwelcoming environment at Memorial University has found a “masculine culture” at the Saint John’s, Newfoundland, school.

Dr Shirley Katz, an associate professor of humanities at York University and member of the Bar of Ontario, conducted personal interviews, group meetings, telephone interviews, e-mail correspondence and held an open forum.

“While some interviewed emphasized a positive environment, many of those interviewed reported evidence of a serious malaise and masculine culture,” the report said.

The study was completed in response to concerns about the experiences of Deepa Khosla, a political science professor who had previously taught at the University.

Khosla passed away in November 2005 from a brain hemorrhage caused by a brain aneurysm. Following her death, the University received messages from her family and colleagues, which alleged that she had felt a lack of support for her safety, and there existed an unwelcoming environment for women at Memorial.

Before her death, Khosla wrote letter to Axel Meisen, President of Memorial University, which claimed that she had received unwanted attention from a male graduate student.

The student allegedly approached Khosla on the street, knew her name, asked her to go out for coffee after she had already declined, and tried to register for one of her course despite having already taken the class with another professor.

At a 13 September briefing about Katz’s report, Meisen said it concluded

interactions between Khosla and the student “were brief and apparently benign.”

“Dr Katz found that the units within the University that were approached by Dr Khosla and the administrators who approached her responded with alacrity and utter good faith,” said Meisen.

Although the report also said the Administration concluded the student posed no threat to Khosla, it did conclude that her concerns grew over time because she couldn’t find out the degree of risk the student posed.

Khosla’s sisters, Prabha and Meenal, say the Administration should have told Khosla the student wasn’t a threat.

“If they knew that the student was not a threat, then why was she never, ever, ever, told that?” Prabha Khosla said. “Isn’t that one of the appropriate things they should have done? I mean, she was an adult, she’s a grown-up. If they had said that and validated it, it would have reduced a lot of the stress and anxiety that she was experiencing.”

Seeing the full report would help them put the information in context, say the sisters.

The full report remains to be released publicly. The university is searching for someone to edit out contentious personal information contained in the pages.

“If we want to release the report, in order to be in compliance with the laws of the province, the information has to be ... blacked out,” Meisen said. “This isn’t a discretionary matter on behalf of the University or anybody else. This is a legal obligation.”

As of yet, who will edit the report is unknown, but Meisen assures they will be independent from the University and have expertise in privacy legislation.

Despite finding little evidence of harassment in Khosla’s case, Katz

outlined a number of recommendations for improving the University’s climate for women.

The report suggested more staff training sessions about harassment issues and a thorough review of policies and procedures related to cases of sexual harassment. Meisen says many of the recommendations are already being implemented.

“I thought the forum was a good beginning,” said Jean Guthrie, a women’s studies professor.

She said she was happy to hear the promise of working groups that will probe the recommendations of the report, review policies and write new guidelines.

“I’m also very pleased to hear that that review is already underway in many places,” she said.

However, Guthrie says the University needs to tread carefully when selecting people to review those policies.

“Who’s going to be rewriting these policies and procedures? With references to what principles of justice? With reference to what assumptions? Are we going to turn over the review of this masculinist environment, as it has been described, to the people that have always managed and framed policy in the past, and who may see through a particular set of lenses?” Guthrie said.

Meanwhile, Prabha Khosla worries that the report doesn’t address all of the concerns with she has about the atmosphere of the University.

“There’s nothing in the briefing that makes clear what’s going to happen to all the men who are the ones who were involved in inappropriate behaviour,” she said.

Meisen said anyone named in the report would be dealt with in accordance with the University’s harassment procedures. As far as he knows, nobody has made a formal complaint.

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