

Scottsdale Community College Loses Its War On Academic Freedom

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Nicholas Damask, a professor at Scottsdale Community College in Arizona, recently gave a quiz to his class on World Politics. Three questions on it offended a Muslim student, who first made known his displeasure to the professor by email, labeling those quiz questions, and their answers, as being “in distaste of Islam.” Professor Damask attempted to explain the sources for those questions, and their answers, but this did not satisfy the student, who posted about the whole matter, including the quiz questions, on the social media page of a Muslim comedian. That subsequently led to an online campaign, posted on the Instagram account of the college, of vilification, hate, and death threats, directed at Professor Damask by Muslims. As a consequence, Professor Damask had to go into hiding with his grandson and elderly parents.

Here are the three multiple-choice questions to which the Muslim student took offense:

- Q. Who do terrorists strive to emulate? A. Mohammed
- Q. Where is terrorism encouraged in Islamic doctrine and law? A. The Medina verses [i.e., the portion of the Qur'an traditionally understood as having been revealed later in Muhammad's prophetic career]
- Q. Terrorism is _____ in Islam. A. justified within the context of jihad

As the online baying by Muslims for the professor's blood continued, the college's administration did not take down the site, nor remove the death threats. Instead, it entered the fray, not to defend Professor Damask and the principle of academic freedom, but to denounce Damask without giving him a chance to discuss those three questions-and-answers, and the textual sources that justified their appearance. They did not ask him to explain himself; he had already been consigned to the outer darkness without any discussion or possibility of due process. In this Star Chamber proceeding, in an Instagram post the interim SCC President Chris Haines not only agreed that the quiz questions were "inaccurate, inappropriate, and not reflective of the inclusive nature of our college," but said Damask "will be apologizing" to the offended student.

On what basis did Chris Haines know that those three quiz questions were "inaccurate"? Had Haines studied the sources which Professor Damask relied on? Why does one suspect that President Haines has never read a single word of the Qur'an, nor any of the Sahih (authentic) Hadith, and therefore has no basis on which to declare those questions to be "inaccurate"? Did she know that Muhammad is regarded as the "Perfect Man" and "Model of Conduct" (54:31, 33:21) which is naturally why he is to be emulated? Did she ever read the Qur'anic verses – 3:151, 8:12 among them – that call for striking terror into the hearts of the Infidels? Did she know about the celebrated hadith in which Muhammad said "I have been made victorious

through terror"? Wouldn't that knowledge remove her doubts about the "accuracy" and the "appropriateness" of those three quiz questions? Or would such knowledge not have changed her mind at all, because for her what mattered was not truth, but only the effect of those quiz questions on sensitive Muslims, so quick to take offense at "hurtful remarks" and who, in the interests of Diversity and Inclusivity, must always be placated?

According to Haines, the college was also "permanently" banning those questions from future quizzes. Haines implied they violated the college's nondiscrimination policy. "We applaud the student for bringing this to our attention – and encourage any student or employee to speak out" when offended by quiz questions, Haines said.

The only person to be applauded here is not the student who complained because he didn't like anything said "in distaste of Islam" [sic], but the death-threatened Professor Damask. It is he who dared to include such questions about Islam in his quiz, when nowadays it would have been all too easy to ignore certain aspects of the faith, in order to avoid the contretemps, and the threats, that inevitably follow any attempt nowadays to discuss unappetizing home truths about Islam. And there was also Professor Damask's refusal to sign the letter of apology that President Haines had assured Muslim students would be forthcoming, a groveling affair that Haines had prepared for him to sign. This "prepared letter" was reminiscent of the kind of self-incriminating documents that Chinese officials would prepare in advance and force the targets of their terror campaigns to sign during the Cultural Revolution.

Damask had tried to explain to those who would listen – which did not include the administrators whose minds were already made up – that "All quiz questions on each of my quizzes, including the ones in question here, are carefully sourced to the reading material. On this quiz, questions were sourced to

the Qur'an, the hadiths, and the sira (biography) of Mohammed, and other reputable source material."

Damask sent two detailed emails to the student who had originally taken offense, responding to his complaints, but these had no effect. That's when the student posted the questions, and his complaint, on the College's Instagram account. A social media campaign grew, and grew, and became ever more threatening. Damask notes: "An unrelated school post about a school contest was hijacked, with supporters of the student posting angry, threatening, inflammatory and derogatory messages about the quiz, the school, and myself."

At this point, Scottsdale Community College officials, who should have defended Professor Damask's exercise of academic freedom, instead joined the attack on him. An administrator "stepped in to assert on a new Instagram post that the student was correct and that I was wrong – with no due process and actually no complaint even being filed – and that he would receive full credit for all the quiz questions related to Islam and terrorism."

On the basis of what knowledge of Islam could that administrator have asserted that the student was "correct" in complaining about the three quiz questions? Is it the position of that administrator that Muslims do not try to emulate Muhammad? What about Qur'an 54:31 and 33:21, that explicitly tell Muslims that Muhammad is the Perfect Man and the Model of Conduct? And does that administrator believe that terrorism is not encouraged in "Islamic doctrine and law"? What about such Qur'anic verses as 3:151 and 8:12, that explicitly command Muslims to "strike terror in the hearts" of the Unbelievers? Or what of the Hadith in which Muhammad declares that "I have been made victorious through terror"? Do the SCC administrators who were so intent on denouncing Professor Damask for his "inaccurate" questions in any position to do so? What do they know about Islam? Apparently, nothing. They have forgotten Wittgenstein's advice: "whereof we do not know,

thereof we should not speak.” How dare these ignorant-of-Islam administrators take away from a faculty member, teaching a subject that he has been occupied with for 24 years (Damask wrote his doctoral dissertation on terrorism), the right to decide what constitutes an appropriate question, and the correct answer, for his own quiz? What is left of a faculty member’s academic autonomy and freedom of inquiry if administrators substitute their judgment for his on such matters as what questions he may ask, and what answers he may be allowed to accept? They took him to task not because he has been in any way inaccurate or pedagogically unsound, but because he refused to confine himself to what is politically correct.

Here is the craven apology of Interim President of the College Chris Haines to the complaining student and, by extension, to all the others who railed against Professor Damask:

SCC deeply apologizes to the student and to anyone in the broader community who was offended by the material. SCC Administration has addressed with the instructor the offensive nature of the quiz questions and their contradiction to the college’s values. The instructor will be apologizing to the student shortly, and the student will receive credit for the three questions. The questions will be permanently removed from any future tests.

SCC cultivates success when individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds are respected and empowered to contribute. We all benefit by embracing a diversity of voices, viewpoints, and experiences.

The prepared letter that was to have been sent to the complaining student (and meant as well for all those who shared his wounded feelings) had Damask offering a “sincere apology” for “offensive material,” though he recognized that a “simple apology may not be enough to address the harm that I

caused, but I want to try to make amends." Asked to sign the letter, Damask refused.

At this point, who knows what the pusillanimous and craven administrators at Scottsdale Community College might have done to Professor Damask had the Chancellor of the Maricopa County Community College District not become involved? Damask has tenure; Haines could not remove him from his job, but there are many other ways to make a faculty member's life difficult, from the assignment of courses, to the piling on of administrative tasks, to the scheduling of class meetings, to the withholding of research and travel grants.

But then something very good happened. The District announced on May 10 that the three questions Professor Damask had included in that quiz, and that were then posted on social media, had been taken out of context – presented as part of a larger campaign of deliberate vilification of Islam – fell properly within the scope of the course.

The office of the Chancellor promised an immediate investigation. From azcentral.com:

Steven Gonzales, the district's interim chancellor, said he was troubled by a "rush to judgment" by the college and its failure to follow proper procedures in responding to the controversy.

"I apologize, personally, and on behalf of the Maricopa Community Colleges, for the uneven manner in which this was handled and for our lack of full consideration for our professor's right of academic freedom," Gonzales said in a statement.

Of the investigation into the whole affair at SCC by the District, Chancellor Gonzales said, "I expect this to be completed with all deliberate speed. Upon conclusion of the investigation, I will ensure appropriate accountability wherever any failures occur."

"The district also plans to form a Committee on Academic Freedom to champion academic freedom education and training and to resolve academic freedom disputes in the hope of ensuring this fundamental academic value is better understood and realized alongside our longstanding commitment to the value of inclusion," Gonzales said.

The investigation will not involve the professor, who is at no risk of losing his job, Gonzales said.

The Maricopa County Community Colleges' governing board issued a statement Monday afternoon applauding the interim chancellor's decision.

"There has been a significant amount of unfounded misinformation distributed regarding the curriculum, student, and professor," the board statement said. "That misinformation has led to serious allegations and threats to one of our own faculty members with an otherwise unblemished past."

The professor, Nick Damask, said threats made against the school and himself on social media were so alarming that he and his family left their home for their safety.

In his 24 years of teaching at the college, Damask said college administrators often would send emails addressed to its "SCC family members."

"It seems pretty awful to me to throw your 'family members' to a social media mob," Damask said. "That's really what's gotten me down the most."

"If there was such a thing as Mormon terrorism and Southern Baptist terrorism, we would have a unit on that, too," Damask said. "But we don't, so we don't spend any time talking about that."

Damask said the concerned student had emailed him to express

that he was offended, and the questions were then posted on the internet.

Comment:

Clear death threats were made both to Prof. Damask and to his family, requiring them, including his grandson and his elderly parents, to move out of fear for their safety. More than a week went by, during which the school officials allowed those death threats – including demands for his home address – to remain on the college's social media page, allowing the hatred directed at the professor to be spread, giving others the same dangerous ideas, and increasing the mortal threat to the professor and his family. Threats were also made to shoot up, and to burn down, the school. Why didn't the college officials immediately remove all of the threats on the school's social media page? Or take down the page altogether? Had they no desire to protect the professor, to prevent his being subjected to an on-line campaign of vilification, hate, and death threats?

Damask said the student never made a formal complaint and school officials sent him a pre-written apology letter for the student and told him to sign it. Damask did not sign the letter and says he has no plans to apologize.

"I'll never apologize for teaching the content that I am, or the manner in which I'm teaching it," he said.

Now that a higher authority, the Maricopa County District Board, has declared its support for Professor Damask, and will be investigating the way that SCC administrators handled the whole matter, the tables have turned. The outrageous behavior of administrators, that included their leaving up the Instagram account of SCC for more than a week, letting the death threats against Professor Damask mount up, will now be subject to examination. So will the "prepared letter of

apology" that Chris Haines tried to threaten Damask into signing. Her outrageous assault on academic freedom just might end in her being dismissed. That would be a consummation devoutly to be wished.

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