

Published on the web by K. Westhues, 2007, as part of the self-study and documents on “the Westhues case,” 1993-1998. for the context, paste the following URL into your browser:
<http://arts.uwaterloo.ca/~kwesthue/self-study.htm> The name of the student has been deleted.

4 January 1993

Professor Heather MacDougall
Associate Dean for Graduate Affairs
Faculty of Arts

Dear Dean MacDougall:

This is to ask your help toward remedying an unfair comprehensive examination given in our Ph.D. program to my supervisee, [student's name], in December of 1991. The several obvious irregularities are detailed in [student]'s letter to department chair Ron Lambert on January 26, 1992, in his letter to me of October 22, 1992, and in my letter to graduate officer Jim Curtis on October 26, 1992—copies of all these are attached, along with the responses and subsequent correspondence. [Student] was failed on the exam. Lambert directed him to retake it, but first to concentrate on his other remaining comprehensive exam. After completing the latter successfully at the end of August, [Student] formally approached me on the matter and I sought redress from Curtis. Curtis turned the matter over to a committee of volunteers, including one of the professors who failed [student] in the first place. This committee has simply stonewalled [student] and me, refusing even to acknowledge the irregularities, much less to negotiate a fair remedy.

This case is the more serious because [student] is hands down the most accomplished Ph.D. student yet to have enrolled in our program. He already holds the Ph.D. in a related discipline and is the author or co-author of six books in sociology, as well as a number of articles. There is abundant independent evidence of his exceptional expertise in the subject matter of the exam on which he was failed, research methods. He left a senior position with [major Canadian corporation] to return to graduate school for a degree directly in sociology. For such a student to be subjected to an unfair exam is degrading enough. But for the departmental authorities to refuse to apologize, to refuse to read his published work, to refuse to admit outside appraisal of his expertise, and to refuse any and all suggestions for some fair alternative method of examination—this is more degradation than any graduate student, least of all one so accomplished as [student], should have to endure.

The department's inability to admit its mistake and work out a creative solution is rooted, as you might guess, in conflicting views of sociology and social research, and in a variety of personal and professional differences. You, as dean, can hardly be expected to resolve such differences, and I am not asking you to try. When, however, a clear violation of standard rules of fair procedure occurs, and when departmental structures prove themselves over many months to be incapable of recognizing the violation, let alone redressing it, higher academic authority is appropriately called upon to intervene, and to facilitate, creatively and expeditiously, a fair and just resolution.

By way of conclusion, I am happy to tell you that [student] has not let this matter get him down. On a sessional basis last summer, he taught for [name of another university] a sociology course that received the highest student evaluation of all [the other university's] extension courses. The long

manuscript he produced last summer for his special area comprehensive examination has been accepted for publication as a book by [name of publishing company], and will appear this summer under the title, [title]. He has two refereed articles currently in press, in [journal title #1] and [journal title #2].

I do not know what precedents there may be in our Faculty for handling a case like this, nor what procedures you will choose for addressing it. Be sure, however, that I will be pleased to provide you with any further documentation or information I can, and I urge you, of course, to call upon [student], Curtis, Lambert, John Goyder (our current graduate officer, who also chaired the committee that administered the flawed exam), and whoever else may be necessary, in order that you have the most complete information possible on which to bring this matter to a speedy and just conclusion. Many thanks,

Sincerely,

K. Westhues
Professor

copies: Professors Curtis, Goyder, Lambert; Dr. [student]