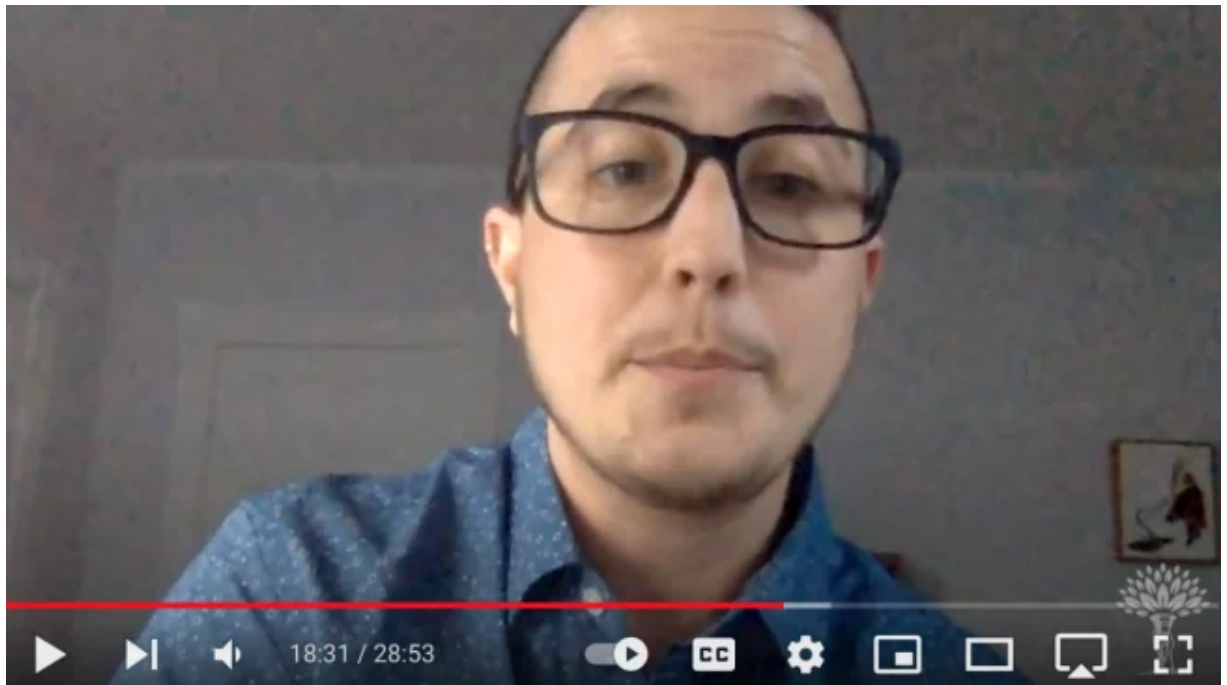


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# Dangerous Ideas?

Old Dominion University removed a controversial scholar from campus, in part for safety reasons. Some say the scholar is really being punished for bringing taboo topics out into the open.

By [Colleen Flaherty](#)



Allyn Walker

YouTube/Prostasia

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**O**ld Dominion University put a professor who studies pedophilia on administrative leave this week, saying that their recent public comments about their research became a safety issue and otherwise

interfered with instruction.

“Reactions to Dr. Walker’s research and book have led to concerns for their safety and that of the campus,” the university said in a statement announcing that Allyn Walker is on leave. “Furthermore, the controversy over Dr. Walker’s research has disrupted the campus and community environment and is interfering with the institution’s mission of teaching and learning.”

Walker, an assistant professor of sociology and criminal justice, was recently interviewed by the ProStasia Foundation about their book, *A Long Dark Shadow: Minor-Attracted People and Their Pursuit of Dignity*. The foundation describes itself as a “child protection organization combining an evidence-based approach to child sexual abuse prevention with its commitment to human rights and sex positivity.” Walker was asked a series of questions about their research on “non-offenders,” or adults who are sexually attracted to minors but do not act on those attractions.

In the interview, Walker advocated calling those who are attracted to minors “MAPs,” or “minor-attracted people,” because that is a term that non-offender advocacy and support groups prefer over “pedophile” or other terms.

“A lot of people, when they hear the term ‘pedophile,’ they automatically assume that means a sex offender, and that isn’t true, and that can lead to a lot of misconceptions about attractions toward minors,”

Walker told Prostasia.

Walker also recommended affirming therapies, as opposed to conversion therapies, for people who need help navigating their attractions, and made a clear moral distinction between those who are attracted to children and those who act on those impulses. The latter severely harms children, whereas the former does not, they said.

“Having an attraction to minors, as long as it isn’t acted on, doesn’t mean that the person who has those attractions is doing something wrong,” Walker said in the interview. “From my perspective, there is no morality or immorality attached to attraction to anyone, because no one can control who they’re attracted to at all. In other words, it’s not who we’re attracted to that is either OK or not OK, it’s our behaviors in responding to that attraction that is either OK or not OK.”

Ultimately, Walker said, help for those who need it “is not widely available, and it should be more widely available.”

The interview, posted to YouTube last week, quickly proved controversial on campus and off. Several petitions call on Old Dominion to “release” or otherwise act against Walker, suggesting that they are a pedophilia apologist and that their comments make the campus less safe.

“Allyn Walker, a non-binary individual, has been promoting the advocacy of pedophiles, to which they call them Minor Attracted Persons (MAP),” reads one such petition, started by an anonymous

student. “This has created a dangerous environment for Old Dominion students, along with the children in the daycare on the main campus. ODU has yet to provide consequences for this professor, as some of administration agree with the proposing argument.”

The university statement about Walker quotes President Brian O. Hemphill as saying, “I want to state in the strongest terms possible that child sexual abuse is morally wrong and has no place in our society. This is a challenging time for our university, but I am confident that we will come together and move forward as a Monarch family.”

In a separate statement, Hemphill said, “Many individuals have shared with me the view that the phrase ‘minor-attracted people’ is inappropriate and should not be utilized as a euphemism for behavior that is illegal, morally unacceptable and profoundly damaging. It is important to call pedophilia what it is. As a father, I am troubled by this narrative and its potential consequences for my children and that of future generations.”

Hemphill continued, “Ideally, we would be able to debate even the most challenging issues without disruption or threats of violence, but that is not the world we live in today. Our campus has recently become the target of threats and other unacceptable disruption.”

Further addressing academic freedom, Hemphill said that “sensitive topics and the expression of new or controversial views lie at the heart of academic research. Old Dominion University remains committed to

providing an environment in which our faculty can and will engage in rigorous research. At the same time, this freedom carries with it the obligation to speak and write with care and precision, particularly on a subject that has caused pain in so many lives.”

He added, “I am confident that our Monarch family will rise to the occasion in our continuing campus dialogue, and I am equally confident that we share a common starting point for the discussion: rejection of any form of sexual abuse of children.”

Walker said in a written statement that the Prostasia interview was about “new strategies for protecting children that come from my research,” and that a “60-second soundbite was taken from that interview by an anti-LGBTQ blog, misrepresenting my work. The post then circulated in right-wing conspiracy forums and on social media.”

This suggests an attack on academic freedom, they said. “I have also been attacked based on being Jewish and a member of various LGBTQ communities. These personal attacks have also included threats on my life.”

It consequently became “unsafe for me to remain on campus,” Walker said. “While it’s unfortunate that it was necessary, the university’s decision to place me on administrative leave acknowledges the gravity of the threats against me and to persons on campus. I am grateful to the university for prioritizing the safety of everyone in the Monarch community.”



“then they are the ones who need to be dealt with,” Wilson said.

Adam B. Steinbaugh, a program director at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, said that FIRE is “concerned by the deteriorating situation at ODU.”

“We should be concerned whenever protected expression—and Professor Walker’s speech falls well within the protection of the First Amendment and academic freedom—is met with threats of violence, regardless of viewpoint. And we should be alarmed when universities take action against faculty members in response to alleged threats or protest targeting the speaker.”

The appropriate response to credible threats of violence made in response to “unpopular, controversial or dissenting speech” is to “punish those who are attempting to silence a speaker through threats, not silence the speaker on the threateners’ behalf,” Steinbaugh said. “By doing the latter, ODU is effectuating a classic heckler’s veto.”

Steinbaugh called on ODU to immediately and “transparently explain why it has removed a professor from the classroom and why less drastic measures were not taken.”

Another appropriate response to offensive speech is “more speech,” not less, Steinbaugh said, adding that FIRE is also concerned by some student social media reports that messages written on campus in chalk calling for Walker to be fired have been removed.

Beyond academic freedom hawks, some academics who study sexuality have defended Walker's views as being well within the realm of the disciplines.

Skye Stephens, associate professor of psychology at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada, who studies atypical sexual interests and childhood sexual abuse prevention, said Wednesday, "In my field, we distinguish between sexual attraction and sexual behavior, which is not controversial."

People can have sexual interests or attractions that they do not act on, she said, meaning that "not every individual who is sexually attracted or interested in something will act on these fantasies, which extends to people with sexual attraction to children. Researchers and clinicians are increasingly aware of individuals who are sexually attracted to children who do not sexually offend against them." Stephens said it was also important to note that not everyone who sexually offends against a child has a sexual interest in children, per se, and may offend against them in this way for other reasons.

Stephens said the term "MAP" is also used "by some who have sexual attraction to children and youth under the age of consent," and that it appears in some of the academic literature on this topic. As with other areas of research, there remains debate over the best or most appropriate terminology, she said.

Asked how the Walker case might impact research-backed efforts to

prevent harm to children, Stephens said the negative attention it's attracted "could have a chilling effect on those who work in the field. I do wonder if the current climate might impact people who do this type of work or those who might do this type of work." For example, she asked, "How many people who might be interested in researching this topic see the intense backlash and simply choose to pursue another topic? I think this is very unfortunate if we want to make real progress on important societal issues."

That said, Stephens continued, the attention on the case "also signals the incredible importance of the work we do and how complex it is to engage the public on this topic." Strong emotions are understandable, she said, "but at the end of the day, they do not help us protect children. We need to have tough conversations that do not come from the place of fear and misinformation if we truly want to reduce harm to children."

## Written By

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