

Scholars blast Portland State for discipline against professor for 'stress-testing' publishing standards

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The biggest academic publishing story of last year was probably the “grievance studies” project that included Portland State University’s Peter Boghossian, who submitted intentionally bad papers to prominent academic journals to expose their low standards.

It was a more ambitious version of physicist Alan Sokal’s famous published hoax that claimed “quantum gravity was a social construct.” About a third of the journals accepted the papers Boghossian co-wrote before the hoax was exposed by *The Wall Street Journal*.

While the experiment divided academia, the less controversial question is whether PSU is right to take disciplinary action against the philosophy professor.

The Oregon Association of Scholars, the state affiliate of the National Association of Scholars, accused the public university of punishing a “whistleblower” who did nothing more than expose the “shameful lack of standards” in peer-reviewed journals “devoted to identity grievances and ideological agitation.”

Led by Boghossian’s PSU colleague Bruce Gilley – himself investigated by PSU for several months, allegedly because of his pro-colonialism article – the OAS said Boghossian’s project was just a form of “stress-testing” common to field such as banking, “to determine the strength and reliability of safeguards.”

The group mocked the university for its stated grievances against Boghossian – that he “fabricated” data that was on its face ludicrous, conducted unapproved “human subjects research” on academic journal editors and peer reviewers, and didn’t get institutional approval for a fake study of “rape culture” in dog parks.



Whether PSU eventually punishes Boghossian for wide-scale data fabrication, it has already punished him by preemptively nixing any research that involves him and halting any human subjects research PSU has not approved, OAS said:

These charges are bogus and ideologically motivated. Journal reviewers and editors have never been considered part of human subjects research protocols, not only because the scholar's interactions with them are unforeseeable and separate from the research but also because the reviewers are anonymous. More generally, the hoax or satire based on concocted data that is later revealed to be such as part of the research is a fundamental and long-standing method of intellectual inquiry in the Western liberal tradition.

Boghossian should be “given a letter of commendation for his research efforts” and PSU should promote his work, OAS said. It also called on PSU trustees and state lawmakers to affirm that academic freedom includes “the right to conduct hoaxes,” and create an independent committee “to recommend reforms to strengthen academic freedom in Oregon public universities.”

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