

★ Group: Hofstra should drop probe of professor

Harassment is alleged over comments made

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A free speech group is demanding that Hofstra University drop its harassment investigation into comments made by a professor who deemed a colleague's proposal for new Jewish Studies courses "word salad."

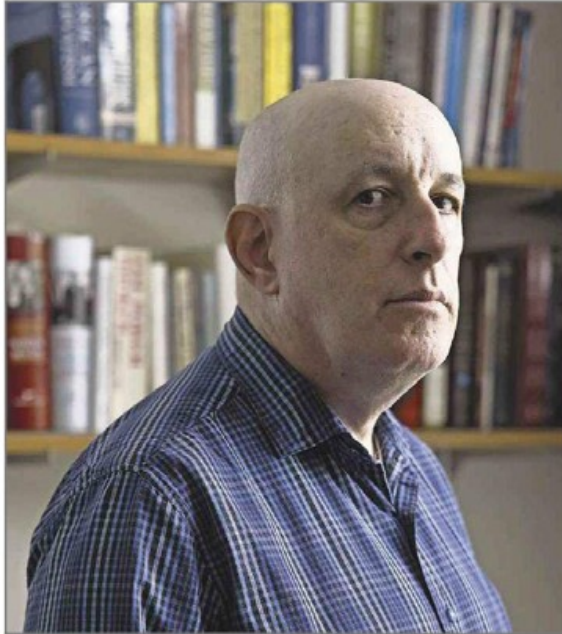
The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, or FIRE, is calling for the Hempstead university to end its probe into statements made last year by Professor Richard Himelfarb and refrain from disciplining him.

The dispute comes at a time of heightened tensions on campuses across the country, with universities' responses to incidents ranging from incivility to alleged discrimination sparking fears that First Amendment free speech rights could be violated when schools impose discipline.

The conflict stems from a Nov. 3 faculty meeting at which Professor Santiago Slabodsky proposed two new courses, according to a June 5 letter to Hofstra from Philadelphia-based nonprofit FIRE. At the meeting, Himelfarb disparaged the proposal and said the courses did not have enough "Jewish content," according to FIRE, which released the letter. Soon after, Slabodsky filed a harassment complaint.

Slabodsky is a religion professor and the Robert and Florence Kaufman Endowed Chair in Jewish Studies at Hofstra. Himelfarb is a political science professor who holds a doctorate from the University of Rochester.

Himelfarb learned from Hofstra officials in April that Slabodsky had requested an "informal resolution," but the next month he was told that the matter would go before the University Harassment Review Board, according to the



ALEXANDRA VILLA LOARCA

Hofstra University political science professor Richard Himelfarb criticized a colleague's proposal for new Jewish studies courses.

letter from FIRE.

In his complaint against Himelfarb, Slabodsky said the phrase "word salad" was "discriminatory against his accent, native language, and Latino identity," according to FIRE. Slabodsky was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and he has studied at the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary in Argentina and earned a master's degree from Duke University and a doctorate from the University of Toronto, according to Hofstra.

Slabodsky did not respond to requests for comment by phone and email. In a statement, Hofstra spokeswoman Terry Coniglio said, "Hofstra is reviewing this matter according to established procedure. No final determination has been made."

In an interview, Himelfarb said his comments were about Slabodsky's proposal, not his ethnicity.

"The idea that my comment could be construed as attacking his ethnicity is, I think, on

the face of it absurd," he said. But while the complaint makes its way through the process, he said, the accusation is "hanging over my head like a dark cloud."

Himelfarb said he offered to apologize, but his offer did not resolve the matter.

The First Amendment protects free speech rights, especially in an academic setting in which professors are engaged in debate, FIRE attorney Garrett Gravley wrote in the group's June 5 letter to Denise Cunningham in Hofstra's human resources office, with a copy to university president Susan Poser.

Free speech is "the lifeblood of academic freedom," he wrote.

Himelfarb's comments were not "severe" or "pervasive" and they do not meet the definition of harassment under federal law or Hofstra's policies, Gravley wrote.

The "word salad" remark was "nothing more than a sub-

WHAT NEWSDAY FOUND

■ **A free speech group** is demanding that Hofstra University drop its harassment investigation into "word salad" comment.

■ **A complaint filed by the colleague** said the phrase was discriminatory against his "accent, native language, and Latino identity," according to the free speech group.

■ **The professor being investigated**, Richard Himelfarb, said his comments were about his colleague's proposal, not his ethnicity.

jectively offensive comment" that was "a critique of the clarity, coherence, and intelligibility of Slabodsky's proposal," he wrote.

Moreover, the seven-month lag since the dispute fails to address the grievance "promptly," as required by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, which accredits institutions, he wrote.

Workplaces throughout the nation are coping with increases in incivility, said Ashley Virtue, director of external relations for the San Diego-based National Conflict Resolution Center, whose work includes training at universities on inclusive communication and harassment prevention.

"On a daily basis we are bombarded by rhetoric that is hateful, that is boldly offensive, and a lot of that is because of click bait, social media, the stuff that draws people in," she said. "We have become much less adept at having a conversation with someone who disagrees with us."

Without addressing the dispute at Hofstra, she said that it can be better to hold a discussion between people engaged in a dispute, facilitated by a trained mediator, and offer communication training, rather than either ignoring the conflict or disciplining one of the parties.

VP VANCE TO BE AT LI EVENT NEXT WEEK

BY BILLY HOUSE AND YANCEY ROY
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WASHINGTON — Preparations are underway for Vice President JD Vance to be featured in at least one event in Democratic Rep. Tom Suozzi's congressional district next week, the White House announced Thursday.

Vance is to deliver remarks Wednesday in Bethpage at what is described as "an official messaging" event starting at 10 a.m. at Gold Coast Studios, four sources familiar with the plans said. It will not be a political fundraiser.

Those sources would not say, however, whether there could be other, more direct political activity included during Vance's visit to Nassau County.

The vice president's spokesperson in Washington on Thursday did not immediately return requests for comment. An aide to Nassau County GOP chairman Joe Cairo also did not reply to messages.

But an announcement posted on the White House website allows those interested to register for up to one ticket, on a first-come, first-serve basis.

The visit comes as New York and Nassau County prepare for key fall races.

Nassau County Executive Bruce Blakeman is running to unseat New York's Democratic governor, Kathy Hochul, and the county also includes all or parts of three congressional districts.

Two of those are held by Democrats and are seen by non-partisan political handicappers as potentially competitive in this fall's elections for party control of the U.S. House, narrowly held now by Republicans.

Bethpage is in Suozzi's district, and nearby areas are represented by Democrat Laura Gillen of Rockville Centre. The local GOP-backed candidate seeking Suozzi's seat is former Assem. Member Michael LiPetri; the endorsed candidate seeking Gillen's seat is Jeanine Driscoll, the Hempstead receiver of taxes.

Suozzi, LiPetri and Driscoll all face June 23 primaries.