

Want to get rid of an annoying academic?

BRIAN MARTIN

UNIVERSITY administrators are familiar with academics who are uncomfortably outspoken, disruptive or different. If these problem staff would just leave the campus, life would be much easier. But how can this desirable outcome be achieved?

The answers are in a recent book by Kenneth Westhues, *Eliminating Professors: A Guide to the Dismissal Process* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

Westhues, a sociologist at the University of Waterloo in Canada, gives a step-by-step account of how administrators can get rid of troublesome academics.

There are five stages.

First is ostracism, to cut the victim off from influence and support. Second is administrative harassment, often in petty ways.

Then comes the incident, an action by the victim that can trigger formal retribution. The fourth stage covers the various appeal procedures and the final stage is elimination.

Within this framework, there are many specific points of value. For example, the matter of truth can sometimes be an obstacle, but by following Westhues' practical principles for administrators it can be reduced to manageable dimensions.

Principle one, for example, is that charges should be formulated sufficiently vaguely so that hard facts are not relevant.

From this description, you might imagine that Westhues is some sort of academic Machiavelli, giving advice to university rulers on maintaining power. Actually, Westhues is on the side of those targeted by administrators.

Indeed, he has been a target himself. His book is an extended satire.

After immersing himself in the details of some 25 cases of academics targeted for elimination, Westhues extracted common features and developed his guide for administrators.

To personalise his advice, he dubs the hypothetical target for elimination "Dr Pita", an acronym for Pain In The Arse. He also recounts a number of the cases to illustrate his recommendations.

It would require a thick hide to be

oblivious to Westhues' satire.

For example, he describes how to use ethics committees or sexual harassment committees in the elimination process, commenting that: "The ethics tribunal is sometimes decried as a star chamber, as if this were something to be ashamed of."

"In fact, the Court of Star Chamber dispensed a great deal of justice in England in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries."

Westhues recommends to administrators the virtues of "unit-think", a shared belief system and culture that is conducive to expelling those who are disloyal.

The idea of unit-think is based on the concept of "groupthink" that was used by Irving Janis to explain several disastrous United States foreign policy decisions.

Westhues tells managers that Janis did not sufficiently emphasise the positive aspects of groupthink, perhaps because he was too oriented to the value of individual rights.

Although intended as a bitter satire, Westhues gives a remarkably perceptive account of the techniques useful for getting rid of unwelcome academics. Of course, it can also be read by those who are targeted, and their supporters, as a primer on what is likely to happen and how best to oppose it.

For example, in many cases, supporters of an academic under attack

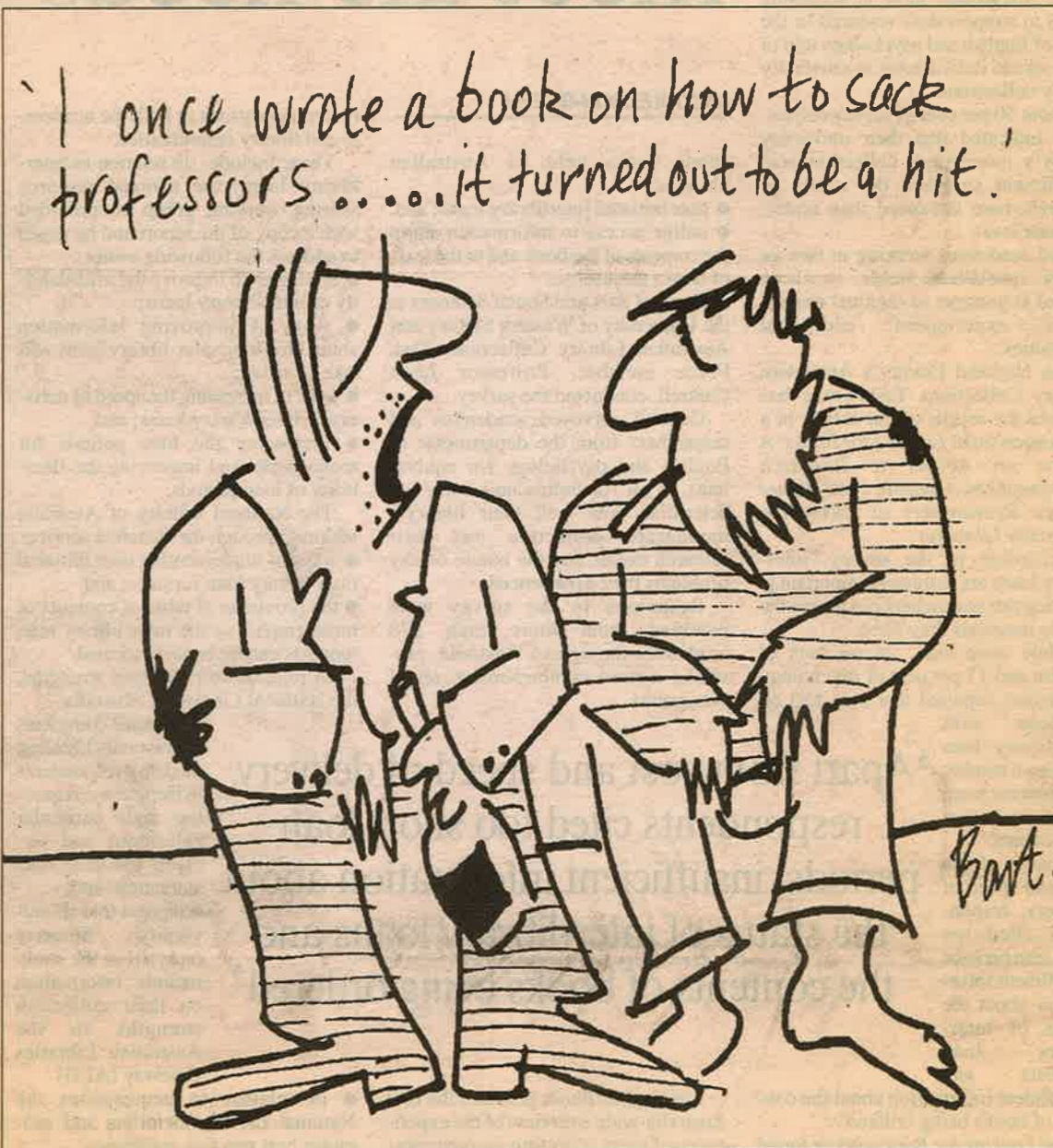
write letters to university officials. Westhues describes 10 typical points made in such letters, such as testimonials to the academic's teaching and pleas for due process, so that managers can be forewarned, "lest you be caught off

guard and be tempted to write an equally passionate, aggressive reply".

These 10 points can equally be used as a guide for those writing letters.

Stances that can help those targeted for elimination include building support (to avoid ostracism), demanding that charges be precise, pushing for open procedures and using the media.

While his book is most readable and free of ponderous scholarship, Westhues underpins his account with references to relevant research. He



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uses to good effect the sociological study of moral panics and Heinz Leymann's investigations of mobbing, which is collective bullying in the workplace.

Another body of literature, not mentioned by Westhues, is that on whistleblowing, from which quite similar conclusions can be reached.

Interspersed with his advice for academic managers, Westhues tells about waiting for the report of the outside judge in his own case.

He says he wrote the book as a method of psychological sustenance while this report was pending.

Readers are treated with his increasingly frustrated correspondence to the outside judge as succes-

sive promised delivery dates come and go.

This personal saga makes the entire book very approachable.

Eliminating Professors can make for uncomfortable reading, at least for anyone open to self-questioning.

For who has not joined in damaging gossip about a quirky colleague or sat on the sidelines while a talented academic was drummed out of the university for minor transgressions?

As Westhues notes, "it is not something we like to think about, least of all in cases close to home. Like the fabled monkeys, we shield our eyes and ears from the event".

Of course, the best justification for eliminating an academic is that the

person actually deserves it, and undoubtedly there are plenty of cases where this is true.

By learning from Westhues' guide, administrators can help everyone by dispatching such individuals swiftly and deftly. The trouble is that the same techniques can be used against others: "In truth, the way you whack a good guy is identical to the way you whack a bad guy."

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