

# Free Ottawa yoga class scrapped over 'cultural issues'

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Student leaders have pulled the mat out from 60 University of Ottawa students, ending a free on-campus yoga class over fears the teachings could be seen as a form of "cultural appropriation."

Jennifer Scharf, who has been offering free weekly yoga instruction to students since 2008, says she was shocked when told in September the program would be suspended, and saddened when she learned of the reasoning.

Staff at the Centre for Students with Disabilities believe that "while yoga is a really great idea and accessible and great for students ... there are cultural issues of implication involved in the practice," according to an email from the centre.

The centre is operated by the university's Student Federation, which first approached Scharf seven years ago about offering yoga instruction to students both with and without disabilities.

The centre goes on to say, "Yoga has been under a lot of controversy lately due to how it is being practiced," and which cultures those practices "are being taken from."

The centre official argues since many of those cultures "have experienced oppression, cultural genocide and diasporas due to colonialism and western supremacy ... we need to be mindful of this and how we express ourselves while practising yoga."

The concept of cultural appropriation is normally applied when a dominant culture borrows symbols of a marginalized culture for dubious reasons -- such as the fad of hipsters donning indigenous headdresses as a fashion statement, without any regard to cultural significance or stereotype.

But Scharf, a yoga teacher with the downtown Rama Lotus Centre, said the concept does not apply in this case, arguing the complaint that killed the program came instead from a "social justice warrior" with "fainting heart ideologies" in search of a cause celebre.

"People are just looking for a reason to be offended by anything they can find," said Scharf.

"There's a real divide between reasonable people and those people just looking to jump on a bandwagon. And unfortunately, it ends up with good people getting punished for doing good things."

There were about 60 students who participated in the free program.

Acting student federation president Romeo Ahimakin denied the decision resulted from a complaint.

Ahimakin said the student federation put the yoga session on hiatus while they consult with students "to make it better, more accessible and more inclusive to certain groups of people that feel left out in yoga-like spaces. ... We are trying to have those sessions done in a way in which students are aware of where the spiritual and cultural aspects come from, so that these sessions are done in a respectful manner."

Scharf offered a compromise, suggesting she change the name from yoga to "mindful stretching," since that

would reflect the content of the program and would "literally change nothing about the course."

"I'm not pretending to be some enlightened yogi master, and the point (of the program) isn't to educate people on the finer points of the ancient yogi scripture," she told the Sun.

"The point is to get people to have higher physical awareness for their own physical health and enjoyment."

According to email correspondence between Scharf and the centre, student leaders debated rebranding the program, but stumbled over how the French translation for "mindful stretching" would appear on a promotional poster, and eventually decided to suspend the program.

Student federation official Julie Seguin sympathized with Scharf over e-mail, defending the use of the term "yoga," and saying, "I am also still of the opinion that a single complaint does not outweigh all of the good that these classes have done."

Seguin said "labeling the CSD's yoga lessons as cultural appropriation is questionable (and) debatable" and called on further discussion with the student executive.

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