



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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7 January 2016

Robert Kerr, PhD  
Vice-President and Provost  
Laurentian University  
935 Ramsey Lake Road , Sudbury ON P3E 2C6

Dear Dr Kerr,

I am writing as the president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), a national organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and reasoned and respectful debate. (For further information, please see our website at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).)

According to a report in the newspaper BayToday.ca (<https://www.baytoday.ca/local-news/academic-censorship-prof-removed-from-course-85106>), Laurentian University recently removed psychology professor Michael Persinger from a year-long introductory course he was teaching because in September, when the course began, Dr Persinger had asked students to sign a statement of understanding. The university removed Dr Persinger, the report states, on the grounds that a professor may not ask students to sign a memorandum as a condition of taking his or her course.

Should these reports be accurate, the removal of Dr Persinger raises concerns regarding 1) proper procedure in investigating and responding to student complaints, and 2) the university's responsibility to both students and faculty not to violate the academic integrity of their courses.

1) The *BayToday* article quotes Dr Persinger denying that signing the document was a prerequisite to remaining in the course. Surely Dr Persinger himself did not believe that he could stop qualified students from taking a seat. Perhaps, of course, a student or two came to believe mistakenly that signing the document was indeed a requirement. Or, perhaps a student or two came to believe mistakenly that by signing the document he or she was

waiving a right to complain to an administrator about something objectionable in the course. The first step in discovering just what role signing the document played, or was believed to play, would be to speak with the professor and the students. Laurentian, it seems, did not conduct an investigation to ascertain the facts. Dr Persinger might well have been removed from his course, then, simply because a student misunderstood what he or she was doing in signing, or declining to sign, the statement of understanding.

2) Professors construct and teach their courses so as to realize their particular educational goals. Their academic freedom to construct and teach their courses as they will ensures that they are sincere about the value to their students of their courses. Removing a professor from a course in such circumstances and substituting another thus violates the integrity of the course.

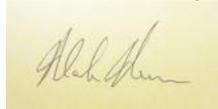
Dr Persinger, however, was removed from his class because of a pedagogical choice he had made months ago, one that had had no lasting deleterious effects on his students. The decision to remove him has been detrimental to Laurentian students.

It is for these two reasons, then—that no good evidence so far shows Dr Persinger to have violated any rule and that his removal harms his students—that the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship urges that you immediately restore Dr Persinger to his class.

Of course, if it is unknown whether Dr Persinger represented signing the statement of understanding to his students either as a course requirement or as agreeing to a contract of some sort, you will quite properly want to investigate to find out. If, at the end of that investigation, you judge that Dr Persinger wasn't as clear as he needed to be, then you should take action. That action, though, should not be to remove Dr Persinger from his course, for the reasons given above. It should simply be to instruct Dr Persinger to be more careful next time to ensure that all his students understand the nature of their signing the statement.

Thank you for your consideration of these remarks. We look forward to hearing from you. With your permission, we will be pleased to post your reply on our website together with this letter to you.

Yours sincerely,

A rectangular area containing a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored background. The signature appears to read "Mark Mercer".

Mark Mercer

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Cc. Dominic Giroux, President and Vice-Chancellor, Laurentian University  
Jim Ketchen, Laurentian University Faculty Association  
Michael Persinger, Psychology, Laurentian University