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from Dr. Arig al Shaibah, Vice-Provost, Student Affairs

*October 25, 2017*

## **Update from Dr. Arig al-Shaibah supporting freedom of expression, respectful dialogue and inclusive environment at Dalhousie University**

Dear community members,

Having lived experiences of racism and Islamophobia, I started this process looking through this lens, while remaining committed to fostering inclusion for our diverse Dalhousie community. From the outset, I sought a fair and just process, guided by values of equal dignity of all persons, freedom of expression and inquiry, intellectual integrity and respectful relationships. As these core values and principles continue to guide me, it has become evident to me that the most appropriate way forward must seek to:

- Reduce harms to individuals and the community;
- Improve and clarify processes to address these kinds of issues;
- Expand the circle of engagement and change; and
- Create a clearer path to meet priorities and goals set out in the Diversity & Inclusiveness strategy.

### **Background**

When I received the student complaint and the offending public Facebook post from the student leader came to my attention, I recognized that the substance of the post in question sought to passionately express allyship for Indigenous peoples and name the legacy of colonialism. I shared, with the student leader who authored the post, my awareness of their intent and my understanding that these issues need to be brought to the forefront in order to influence and mobilize meaningful social change and justice. I also discussed my concerns with the post, which began with “Fuck you all” and ended with ‘whitefragilitycankissmyass’ and ‘whitetearsarentsacred.’ Subsequently, the student leader took down the post of her own volition.

As an institution, we have said that we are committed to fostering an inclusive, respectful and equitable campus where students of diverse backgrounds feel welcomed, are treated with dignity, and have access to full and equal participation in the life and work of the university. We also have acknowledged that, among our diverse student body, there are particularly distinct lived-experiences of exclusion and discrimination among students who have been historically under-represented or under-served by institutions of higher learning.

Holding these two commitments together, I sought to recognize and acknowledge the lived experience of the student leader and the substance of their post, while also validating other students' reasonable expectation to engage in campus debate without being demeaned and derogated by a student leader. These students also represented diverse social identities and some with intersecting lived experiences of marginalization.

To acknowledge the stated impact, I felt that an informal resolution, including a leadership development opportunity with a social justice advocate, was most appropriate given the nature of the situation. I had hoped the resolution option would be welcome as a positive opportunity, however, when it was declined — as is the right of the student — the matter then became subject to the formal Senate disciplinary process.

## Reflection and Next Steps

Having considered and weighed all of the events of the last few weeks, and particularly the last couple of days, at this time, with the endorsement of the officers of Senate and with the knowledge of the Complainant and witnesses, I am withdrawing the complaint for three critical reasons:

- The Code intends to support freedom of speech, while also ensuring access and inclusion by preventing demeaning and intimidating behaviour which may adversely interfere with another person's reasonable participation in University programs and activities; however, it has become evident that the Code, as written, may not place these two core institutional values in sufficient and proper context;

- While educational outcomes may be the appropriate and preferred means for seeking resolution in these types of situations, this situation has caused us to examine whether and how we can seek such outcomes outside of the Senate disciplinary process; and
- Public conversations about this issue, particularly on social media, have become increasingly polarized, and in some instances, hateful, effectively undermining the very values of respect, inclusion and sense of safety we sought for our community at the outset.

This incident has demonstrated the need for an open, thorough discussion on campus about the appropriate policies and processes to support freedom of expression, promote expectations for respectful dialogue by all including student leaders, and foster inclusive environments on campus where all feel that they belong.

Now more than ever, we need to create spaces where diverse perspectives can be heard, where we can develop skills for critical dialogue and coalition-building, and where we can become better social justice advocates and allies. To this end, I have engaged a small team of students and faculty members to advise on and assist in facilitating a campus dialogue series, to be launched with internal and external experts, including the National Coalition Building Institute – Toronto Chapter for example.

I look forward to beginning this work imminently.

Sincerely,

Arig al-Shaibah  
Vice-Provost Student Affairs