

This message was shared with the campus community on Saturday, March 23

<https://www.mtroyal.ca/AboutMountRoyal/MediaRoom/Newsroom/balanceonourcampus.htm>

Message sent to all employees on behalf of President David Docherty

Colleagues:

You've often heard me say that universities are like small cities, filled with complexity, diversity and debate. While we are sometimes divided on issues, the best thing about Mount Royal is that we always come together to honour different perspectives. In the end, we are not divisive. Quite the opposite is true; we are united because of our differences.

As I leave my post as your president, I'm glad to have this opportunity to reach out to you on something that is central to who we are as a university.

At Mount Royal, decisions are made every day, and at every level of the organization. Not every decision is made at the executive level, and even fewer by the executive team as a whole.

Sometimes decisions made within a particular unit seem right from one perspective, and while they may be right for some members of our community, they are not right for others. This dichotomy can exist within individuals as well; as humans, we are complex and multi-faceted, and a part of us may feel one way about an issue, while another part of us feels differently. This is what it means to be human.

We experienced this dichotomy on our campus this week as a result of such a decision.

Creating balance on our campus

Last week, a terrible act of terrorism occurred in Christchurch, New Zealand. Many students and employees — especially Muslim students and employees — are suffering as a result. To start the healing, a vigil was held last Thursday on campus, with more than 150 in attendance.

Before the vigil, it was discovered that Armin Navabi, a Vancouver-based ex-Muslim-turned-atheist had been invited to speak on campus. The presentation

was to take place on Thursday, the same day as the scheduled vigil. As an atheist, Navabi speaks on tolerance for those who share a lack of belief in gods.

With the best of intentions for the well-being and healing of students and employees, members of the Student Affairs and Campus Life team — the same team that booked the speaker to begin with — decided to postpone the speaker to a future date. Unfortunately, while this decision felt right for a number of students and employees who are hurting, including those who made the decision, it was the wrong decision for a university, where values of freedom of expression and academic freedom are paramount.

“Within the realm of Student Affairs and Campus Life, the mental, emotional and spiritual health of students is our primary concern,” says Steve Fitterer, Vice-President, Student Affairs and Campus Life. “We are continually focused on providing an environment in which students feel safe on campus. In retrospect, the decision to postpone the speaker was made in haste, with a lack of information, and also without appropriate consultation.”

Lesley Brown, Provost and Vice-President, Academic offers the academic perspective. “When a speaker is invited to campus, we must always consider that we are providing an opportunity to engage in scholarly dialogue, and when we provide a speaker a platform, we must be mindful that we have a responsibility to give that person an opportunity to speak,” says Brown. “When we cancel or postpone an invited speaker, we remove the ability to engage in that dialogue. For faculty, this is a compromise to academic freedom.”

“When I found out Navabi had been postponed, I was unwavering in my position that this was an academic freedom issue. Academic freedom cannot come with conditions. In a university, we must protect academic freedom in everything we do, regardless of current events or circumstances.”

While we cannot go back in time, we can acknowledge that this decision, while right for some, was not right for all. If the speaker is willing to speak on our campus, we will have him back. An outreach has already been made.

We value the rights of students to feel safe and respected on our campus, and we will do everything we can do to support their mental, emotional and spiritual health and to ensure their physical safety at all times. It is a complementary — and not opposing — value to hold difficult and sometimes provocative conversations on campus, on a wide range of challenging

subjects. We welcome the free exchange of ideas.

While there is often tension between these two values, the sharing of different perspectives within a diverse, safe and inclusive environment is the reason why universities exist. On occasion, timing poses a challenge, and this is often when these two values collide. However, even when timing presents an issue, we cannot compromise our fundamental values as a university.

At Mount Royal University, we must, and we will, uphold the ideals of freedom of expression and academic freedom in our words and in our actions.