



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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22 March 2019

David Docherty, Phd
President, Mount Royal University
4825 Mount Royal Gate SW
Calgary, Alberta, Canada
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Dear President Docherty,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and the merit principle in higher education. (For further information, please see our website at www.safs.ca.)

The *National Post* reports that on 19 March, Mount Royal University cancelled a talk that had been scheduled for Thursday 21 March. (<https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/calgary-university-cancels-event-by-ex-muslim-citing-sensitivity-after-new-zealand-attacks>) The talk, sponsored by the Atheist Society of Calgary, was to be given by Armin Navabi, from Vancouver. Mr Navabi's talk was entitled "The Case against Islamic Reform." Mr Navabi was to discuss the view that Muslims should abandon Islam in favour of atheism rather than try to reform it.

The only statement from Mount Royal about the cancellation that I have been able to locate is from an unidentified interfaith coordinator at the university (or, perhaps, the director of equity & meaningful inclusion). That MRU officer wrote: "Universities are diverse and inclusive places where people should always feel respected and where there is free exchange of ideas. The tragic event that occurred in Christchurch less than a week ago has had a large impact on many members in our community. We made this decision in light of that impact and we would absolutely have the speaker come to our campus at another time."

It is hard to see how the contention that some members of the MRU community would be upset were the talk to have gone ahead justifies cancelling it. As the statement affirms, because Mount Royal is a university, it should be a place where ideas can be freely exchanged. Cancelling the talk is inconsistent with MRU's academic mission.

It is surprising that an interfaith coordinator or an equity officer would have the authority to cancel a scheduled talk. One would think that only an academic vice president or higher,

someone who appreciates well the academic mission of the university and its requirements, would have such authority. Otherwise, that authority could be used arbitrarily, as seems to have happened in this case.

It is true that the sponsor of the talk was not a campus group and, so, did not have the protections against interference that campus groups should enjoy. Nonetheless, cancelling this talk sends to members of the Mount Royal community a signal that their programming might be vetted, which will have a chilling effect on open and free inquiry and discussion on campus. As well, off-campus groups will be disinclined to come to Mount Royal, since they cannot be sure MRU will honour its agreements.

What should be done now to restore Mount Royal's good name and to stem the harmful consequences of Mount Royal's actions? I would think that you, as president, need to issue a statement recognizing that the university made a serious mistake and affirming that MRU values open and free inquiry and discussion. As well, Mr Navabi should be invited by the university to return as soon as possible to give his presentation.

We respectfully request that you respond to our letter. With your permission, we will post your response along with this letter on our website.

Sincerely,



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