



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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14 May 2018

Elizabeth Church, Vice-President Academic and Provost
Mount Saint Vincent University
166 Bedford Highway,
Halifax, NS B3M 2J6

Dear Dr Church:

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.)

I'm concerned about Mount Saint Vincent University's response to complaints that the course Selected Topics in North American History: Residential Schools is scheduled to be taught this fall by a scholar who is not an indigenous person.

According to news reports (<https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/settler-scholar-controversy-over-white-prof-teaching-residential-schools-course-1.3925723>), critics contend that because history professor Martha Walls is not indigenous, she lacks the lived experience needed to understand the discrimination First Nations people have suffered. Critics also charge that

Mount Saint Vincent is engaging in cultural appropriation by assigning the course to a settler scholar and, thereby, perpetuating oppression against indigenous people.

Mount Saint Vincent has responded by calling "for a meeting next week between Indigenous faculty and staff and the professor assigned to the course to determine a way forward." You are quoted as saying, "What we've tried to do is listen to the different perspectives and really try to understand how to move forward in a way that is respectful and thoughtful.... It's a very complex issue and we're really looking at what it means to have expertise in the topic and bringing in the perspectives that need to be there."

Now I assume that the original decision to run the course and to have Dr Walls teach it was made by the Department of History according to the standard procedures in place at the Mount. If that's the case, then the decision to call a meeting to determine a way forward undercuts university collegiality and the integrity of the academic unit responsible for courses and

curriculum.

Expertise in the topic and the perspectives that need to be there are matters for the Department of History to consider and to decide. As well, since both expertise and perspectives are academic matters, they should be decided by academic units on academic grounds alone. The race or ethnicity of the professor is not an academic ground and, thus, should not be a consideration.

It seems to me that instead of calling for a meeting and seeking a way forward, Mount Saint Vincent should have stated that the decision to have Dr Walls teach the course was made collegially in the best university fashion and that Dr Walls is well qualified both as a scholar and as a teacher to teach it.

The idea that only indigenous scholars can teach topics involving indigenous people is false and pernicious. Mount Saint Vincent University should clearly and forcefully repudiate it.

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

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Mercer', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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