

University condemned for handling of residential-schools course controversy

THE CANADIAN PRESS

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Last Updated May 14, 2018 - 4:52pm

<http://thechronicleherald.ca/metro/1570418-university-condemned-for-handling-of-residential-schools-course-controversy>

HALIFAX — A group of Canadian professors is speaking out against a Halifax university's handling of a residential-schools course imbroglio, saying the race or ethnicity of a professor should not be a consideration when assigning a course.

Mount Saint Vincent University found itself embroiled in controversy after assigning a course about Canada's residential schools to a non-Indigenous professor, something activists say undermines reconciliation efforts.

In response, the school called a meeting this week between Indigenous faculty and staff and the professor assigned to the course to determine a way forward.

But the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship said in a letter Monday that the decision to call a meeting undercuts university collegiality and academic integrity.

Mark Mercer, president of the society and a philosophy professor at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, said it's up to the Mount's history department to consider a professor's expertise and perspectives. He said these matters should be judged on academic grounds alone.

"The race or ethnicity of the professor is not an academic ground and, thus, should not be a consideration," Mercer said in a letter to Elizabeth Church, vice-president academic and provost at the school.

"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."

The university should stand by its decision to assign the course to a qualified professor, he added.

A university spokeswoman said Monday the school had received the letter and that it's under review. She said the Mount would be responding directly to the group.

On Friday, Church said the university has been actively recruiting Indigenous faculty, with the search ongoing for additional Indigenous professors.

"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," she said. "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."

The decision to assign a "settler scholar" to teach the course was decried on social media last week as a kind of historical appropriation and reinforcement of the systemic oppression of First Nations.

Critics said only Indigenous Peoples have the lived experience to understand the complex and cumulative ways they've been discriminated against, and that they should teach their own history.

"Part of reconciliation is making space for Indigenous faculty members at universities and Indigenous knowledge perspectives," Patti Doyle-Bedwell, a Mi'kmaq woman and Dalhousie University professor, said on Friday.

"We're talking about indigenizing the academy."

But Sherry Pictou, a women's studies professor at the university who is Mi'kmaq, spoke out in support of the history professor assigned to the course.

Despite the outcry on social media, Pictou said she has "full confidence" in Martha Walls as both as a historian and an ally to the Indigenous community.

Furthermore, she said the work of decolonizing "cannot fall just on the backs and labour of other Indigenous academics."

More than 150,000 First Nations, Metis, and Inuit children were taken from their families — often by force — to attend government residential schools, according to findings by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The commission heard testimony from roughly 7,000 survivors, including graphic details of rampant sexual and physical abuse at the schools, and found at least 6,000 Indigenous children died from malnutrition, disease and widespread abuse.

Rebecca Thomas, a Mi'kmaq community activist and former Halifax poet laureate, said part of reconciliation is allowing Indigenous Peoples a voice.

"There is this perpetuation that non-Indigenous people have the right and expertise to speak on Indigenous topics when in reality the lived experience of what it's like to be a product of these systems within Canada, there's no voice better than first voice."

Brett Bundale, The Canadian Press