



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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26 November 2018

Santa Ono, PhD
Chair, Board of Trustees, Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Study
President and Vice-Chancellor of the University of British Columbia
1958 Main Mall
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z2

Dear Dr Ono,

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.)

SAFS commends your decision to allow scholars associated with the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Study (PWIAS) to pursue the research projects of their choice, without aligning their work with the University of British Columbia's strategic plan.

The mission of the PWIAS is to bring together scholars from different disciplines to enable them to pursue whatever research attracts them. Scholars of the Institute should, then, be free from pressures to investigate only those matters UBC administrators favour.

There is a strong trend at Canadian universities toward having academic senates or administrators designate certain areas of research priority areas and then giving preference to research projects that fall within those areas. We see this trend in official university strategic plans, academic plans, and institutional research plans. By channeling the work of scholars, though, this trend undercuts the ideal of investigation and learning for its own sake. As well, having scholars conform their interests to those that are officially recognized cannot but have baleful effects on the quality of research.

As a flagship Canadian university, UBC must resist this trend and instead create and maintain spaces in which scholars may pursue their passions unencumbered by a need to fit them to institutional priorities. Restoring freedom of research to Peter Wall scholars is a step in the right direction and sends a strong message to the UBC community and to scholars in Canada generally.

SAFS wonders whether the current organization of the PWIAS is adequate to protect the Institute from the forces that resulted in the proposed change you have now wisely rejected and the resignation of Philippe Tortell, the former director. That among the Trustees of the institute there are only two scholars not currently members of the UBC administration is worrisome, as is the provision that enables the Trustees to meet in-camera to decide policy, without the director of the institute.

We will post this letter on our website. If you respond to our letter, we will, with your permission, post your response alongside it.

Sincerely,



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