



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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5 October 2016

Amit Chakma, PhD
President
Western University
Stevenson Hall, Suite 2107
London, ON N6A 5B8

Dear Dr Chakma,

I am writing as president of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), a national organization of university faculty members and others dedicated to the defense of academic freedom and reasoned and respectful debate. (For further information, please see our website at www.safs.ca.)

According to a report in today's *London Free Press*, Western University is investigating whether students who distributed photos of themselves under a banner reading "Western Lives Matter" have violated the university's student code of conduct. The report can be found at this link: <http://www.lfpress.com/2016/10/04/western-university-the-school-in-a-statement-on-racist-signage-says-its-investigating-online-images-and-slogans-that-traded-over-the-weekend-on-social-media>

As I am sure you know, Western's student code of conduct covers such matters as disrupting classes, threatening people or putting people at risk of harm, and harassment. There is nothing in the newspaper report that remotely suggests that the students posing with the banner engaged in any behaviour that fits these categories.

In investigating the incident of the banner and the photos, Western would essentially be investigating students for having and expressing an opinion or for trying to have fun. In our opinion, universities should not be seeking to protect social movements from criticism or satire. Universities should, rather, be places at which opinions can be openly expressed and discussed. A student's opinion should not have to fall in line with the views of university

officials or the president of the student union. The opinions students express can, of course, be criticized, but students should not be threatened with official punishment simply for holding views contrary to those preferred by university officials. Now, likely enough, the students in questions may not have been engaging in political commentary but trying to be humorous. Even so, as students affiliated with Western, they have no responsibility to be respectful of the Black Lives Matter movement or to any phrase or symbol associated with it.

The Student Code of Conduct reads: “Nothing in this Code shall be construed to prohibit peaceful assemblies and demonstrations, lawful picketing, or *to inhibit free speech* as guaranteed by law” (emphasis added). To investigate the students who posed in front of the banner is certainly to interfere with the peaceful expression of opinion or emotion and, thus, to inhibit freedom of expression.

In light of these considerations, SAFS would like your assurance that the students will not be investigated for their legal expression—or a clear explanation of how they violated the code.

SAFS looks forward to hearing from you. We will post this letter on our website. With your permission, we will be pleased to post your reply together with it.

Yours sincerely,

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