



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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9 September 2020

Richard Devlin, FRSC
Office of the Dean
Schulich School of Law
Dalhousie University
6061 University Avenue
P.O. Box 15000
Halifax, NS B3H 4R2

Dear Dean Devlin:

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, see our website at www.safs.ca.)

In your email message of 7 September sent under the subject line “Schulich School of Law #scholarstrike,” you encourage faculty, staff and students within your law school to participate in partisan political activities associated with Scholar Strike Canada (<https://scholarstrikecanada.ca/>), a political movement that in part protests “anti-Black, racist and colonial police brutality in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere.”

As I am sure you know, the movement also supports a variety of political goals, including defunding the police and a campaign by CUPE 3261 “to stop the University of Toronto from contracting out caretaking services, thereby relinquishing its responsibility to safeguard secure and suitable paying jobs and [the] health and safety of workers.”

SAFS is concerned that your encouragement to participate in political activities violates the principle that public institutions of education be non-partisan in politics and take no specific stands on the issues of the day. This principle respects the fact that public institutions are funded by taxpayers of diverse political views for the common good. The principle also makes it possible for scholars and students to research and discuss contentious issues without fear or favour.

Scholars who encourage their students to engage in Scholar Strike actions, then, would be abusing their authority by enlisting students in partisan causes.

Students who do not support certain goals, such as defunding the police, might expect that the Schulich School of Law will not tolerate their dissent, and many students will no doubt hesitate to raise certain topics in the classroom or corridor or to defend their beliefs for fear of being punished or ostracized. They might also internalize lessons in self-censorship or the value of insincerity.

You write in your message that you “respect and support ... activities aimed at responding to systemic racism,” for example, those in which professors “incorporate teach-ins in their class-time or step away from normal teaching/administrative activities to teach students and others about racialized violence.” In a university, though, teachers should approach topics only in the spirit of inquiry and scholarship, and they should feel no pressure to teach where they lack competence. As well, if the topic of racialized violence, say, is not germane to the course as advertised, teaching it will take time and energy away from the topics on the syllabus, the topics with which the students enrolled in the course rightly expect to engage.

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 stylized, flowing script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
President, Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS)
6593, rue Jeanne-Mance
Montreal (Qc) H2V 4L1
president@safs.ca
<http://www.safs.ca/>

Professor, Department of Philosophy
Saint Mary's University
923 Robie Street
Halifax, NS B3H 3C3
mark.mercer@smu.ca
<http://professormarkmercer.ca/>
<http://www.smu.ca/academics/departments/philosophy-faculty-and-staff.html>

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