



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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30 March 2020

Leslie Phillmore, PhD
Acting Associate Dean (Academic)
Faculty of Science
Dalhousie University
Halifax, NS B3H 4R2

Dear Dr Phillmore,

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 is concerned about Dalhousie's decision of 19 March 2020 to remove Gábor Lukács as instructor from his section of Math 1115.

There are three grounds for our concern. The first is that the decision appears inconsistent with the principle that professors of courses are well positioned to make sound and fair pedagogical decisions. The second is that the decision to remove Dr Lukács seems peremptory and unnecessarily harsh, even vindictive. The third is that replacing the instructor of the course is likely to reduce student accomplishment in the course.

First, professors are granted a large sphere of freedom in teaching their courses in part because being close to their students enables them to find effective ways to teach in the specific circumstances of their classrooms. Dr Lukács judged that once the course was moved online, fairness and student motivation required abandoning the standard grading scheme in favour of Pass/Fail. A professor's informed and conscientious decision should not be overruled unless that decision clearly puts something important at serious risk.

It is far from clear that, in the context of online teaching and evaluation, the Pass/Fail system would have been in any way unfair to students. Indeed, the system Dr Lukács intended to use is very close to the new grade options announced by Teri Balser, Dalhousie's Provost, on 26 March. Dr Balser's options, in turn, are informed by much recent thinking about how best to promote learning and respect the integrity of academic standards in our current condition of social distancing and online teaching and evaluating.

Second, Dr Lukács was removed from his course despite the fact that he was actively seeking a resolution to the conflict over his grading decision. He had been ordered to reinstall his previous grading system and was given a very short deadline by which to comply; that deadline passed while he was discussing the matter with the Program Director. The deadline could have been extended until Dr Lukács was in a proper position to respond. In any case, surely an arrangement for assigning grades could have been found that would have left Dr Lukács the teacher in the course.

Dalhousie's unwillingness to wait until a professor has consulted with relevant officers would seem to put at risk collegial relations between the university's administration and its professors.

Why was Dr Lukács forbidden from having contact with his students? This order could serve no pedagogical purpose.

Third, students in the class will be distracted and puzzled by the change of instructors. They will have to get used to a new teaching style. Removing Dr Lukács could not, then, have been in the best interests of the students. Continuity and consistency are always pedagogically valuable, but they must be more valuable than ever in our present challenging circumstances. It is impossible to believe that the removal of Dr Lukács is at all in the interests of the students, and it is their interests that should matter most.

If the decision to remove Dr Lukács stands, Dalhousie will, it appears, have done a disservice to respect for informed and conscientious teaching decisions, to Dr Lukács himself, to relations between the administration and professors, and to the students in Dr Lukács's section of Math 1115.

We respectfully request that you 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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