



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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president@safs.ca

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fiamengo@uottawa.ca

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11 September 2020

Tony Vannelli, PhD
Provost and Vice-President, Academic
Wilfrid Laurier University
75 University Avenue West
Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5

Dear Dr Vannelli:

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 "Statement on the Scholars Strike," you write that "Laurier supports faculty, staff, and students in participating in the digital teach-ins and other events being organized as part of the Scholar Strike."

As I am sure you know, Scholar Strike Canada not only protests "anti-Black, racist and colonial police brutality in the U.S., Canada and elsewhere" but urges activism in pursuit of a variety of concrete partisan 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 Laurier's announcement encouraging members of the Laurier community 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 use class time to 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 Laurier 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. Ostracism now comes in the form of cancel culture, in which social media mobs demand the dismissal of those who dissent from their orthodox beliefs. SAFS is aware that this has happened to Laurier faculty members already this summer. Were professors or administrators to take the side of the mob on a particular issue, it would amplify the threat and significantly suppress free and open discussion and enquiry.

I would add that when a teaching institution endorses a position on a contentious issue, students who are doubtful are apt to internalize lessons in self-censorship or the value of insincerity.

In a university, 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 long, sweeping horizontal flourish at the end.

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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