

Media Statement

John Montalbano, Chair of the UBC Board of Governors

August 18, 2015

First and foremost, I want to reinforce the University of British Columbia's commitment to academic freedom and my commitment as Chair of the Board of Governors to academic freedom. At its August 17, 2015 Board meeting, the Board of Governors reaffirmed their confidence in me as Chair, which I respect and appreciate. It is an honour to volunteer my time as Chair and I will continue to serve.

It is important now that I briefly address some allegations that I interfered in a professor's academic freedom. Let me first say, that I'm deeply concerned with the way in which my interaction with Professor Jennifer Berdahl about her recent blog post (August 8, 2015) has been portrayed.

My intention in contacting Professor Berdahl, who has been a trusted colleague for two years and with whom I have regular contact, was to discuss her blog post and to further understand the professor's concerns. I asked the professor if she would be comfortable with discussing the blog and, in particular, I asked if she thought the discussion would in any way compromise her academic freedom. I asked her to stop me at any time if she felt uncomfortable. She agreed to the call and said that she welcomed the discussion and would not see it as affecting her academic freedom. At no time did I ask the professor to retract any of her blog and at no time did I threaten her funding. In fact, I reinforced that her funding would continue. At no time did I intend to impinge her academic freedom. At the end of our telephone call, Professor Berdahl agreed that we had a productive conversation and though we didn't agree on all points, she confirmed that I did not ask for any retraction, that I affirmed her funding and did not interfere in her academic freedom. Given this, I'm sure most people can understand that I'm upset and hurt by the allegations that our call was an impingement on the professor's academic freedom. I have immense respect for Professor Berdahl and I am saddened that our interaction has caused her such concern.

As the acting President and Provost said in her recent statement, it is important that an objective, independent and thorough process be followed to determine whether there is any validity to the allegations made against me. The Faculty Association collective agreement includes a thoughtful, thorough grievance process and I welcome – in fact, I ask – the professor to engage in this process. I commit to fully engaging in the grievance process if and when the professor lodges a formal grievance request.

I want to thank my family, board colleagues and the campus and broader community for their support. Being subject to these allegations is difficult for me, and this support is much appreciated.

In closing, I would like to say that I look forward to working with Dr. Martha Piper, who will be interim President on September 1, to provide strong leadership as we continue our efforts to be one of the world's leading universities through our core mission of teaching and research. We look forward to celebrating the many successes of the university and its people in our upcoming 100th anniversary.