



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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24 March 2021

Jacques Frémont
President and Vice-Chancellor
University of Ottawa
Tabaret Hall
Ottawa ON K1N 6N5

Dear President Frémont,

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.)

SAFS commends you for standing for freedom of expression in the face of demands by politicians that the University of Ottawa sanction law professor Amir Attaran for his remarks about Quebec being led by a white supremacist government and for rejecting calls that Ottawa U apologize.

You are right that “freedom of expression ... is not a buffet where one can pick and choose what kind of speech is deemed acceptable or not.” It is important that professors and students be able to say what they wish, no matter how distasteful some find their views, if the university is to be a place of open and candid discussion and criticism.

SAFS is concerned, nonetheless, that, according to a [newspaper report](#), you stated that Ottawa U does not share Dr Attaran's opinions. Associating your institution with a position on a matter of public concern can dampen discussion among members of the Ottawa U community. When a university takes a public stand, students and professors might not speak their minds out of respect for the institution or in fear of reprimand.

SAFS is also concerned that you distinguished between postings on Twitter and utterances in a classroom, suggesting that if Dr Attaran had aired his view in class, sanctions might be warranted. Classrooms need to be places of freedom of expression if they are to be hospitable to robust critical discussion.

Government leaders and others should not be calling on universities to sanction professors or seek to oversee and control discussion. You are to be commended for instructing those who

demanded that Ottawa U discipline Dr Attaran on the nature of university values and procedures.

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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