



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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15 November 2019

Santa Ono, PhD
Office of the President
7th Floor, Walter C. Koerner Library
1958 Main Mall
University of British Columbia
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z2

Dear President Ono,

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 has been informed by the UBC Students for Freedom of Expression (SFE) that SFE has not received assurance from UBC that the group may schedule and hold on campus a public lecture and discussion it has been organizing. The talk is by Janice Fiamengo and is entitled "Is Intersectional Feminism Incompatible with Freedom of Expression?" (We note, simply for the sake of full disclosure, that Dr Fiamengo is a member of the SAFS Board of Directors, although she has recused herself from our deliberations on this file.)

SFE originally booked space for 6 November to have Dr Fiamengo give her talk, but on 23 October, UBC's Safety and Risk Services cancelled the event. Ainsley Carry, the Vice President of Students at UBC, wrote to SFE, "Based on the risk assessment for the event, UBC has determined that it is unable to ensure the safety of the persons presenting and attending the event or other persons in the vicinity of the event."

Because new safety and security policies are to be in place at UBC by January, SFE applied to have the talk on 15 January 2020. Conversations SFE members had with Dr Carry led them to believe that that date would be acceptable.

According to SFE, Dr Carry also said UBC would issue a statement condemning thuggery and disruptive demonstrations on campus. That statement has not yet appeared and Dr Carry now seems unwilling to issue it, given that he has informed SFE, "balancing academic freedom with

student safety is complicated.”

SAFS asks that UBC give SFE clear permission to schedule, advertise, and hold the event with Dr Fiamengo on 15 January or near to that day. SAFS also asks that UBC issue a statement that violence, threats of violence, and disruptions will not be tolerated and that law breakers will be identified to the police.

UBC recognizes in official university documents its responsibility to protect and promote free expression and the exchange of ideas. As recently as 24 September 2019, Provost and Vice-President, Academic Andrew Szeri reminded the UBC community of its commitments when he quoted a UBC statement on academic freedom:

“The members of the University enjoy certain rights and privileges essential to the fulfilment of its primary functions: instruction and the pursuit of knowledge. Central among these rights is the freedom, within the law, to pursue what seems to them as fruitful avenues of inquiry, to teach and to learn unhindered by external or non-academic constraints, and to engage in full and unrestricted consideration of any opinion. This freedom extends not only to the regular members of the University, but to all who are invited to participate in its forum. Suppression of this freedom, whether by institutions of the state, the officers of the University, or the actions of private individuals, would prevent the University from carrying out its primary functions. All members of the University must recognize this fundamental principle and must share responsibility for supporting, safeguarding and preserving this central freedom. Behaviour that obstructs free and full discussion, not only of ideas that are safe and accepted, but of those which may be unpopular or even abhorrent, vitally threatens the integrity of the University's forum. Such behaviour cannot be tolerated.” <https://academic.ubc.ca/academic-community/news-announcements/news/statement-provost-regarding-controversial-speakers>

UBC and Dr Szeri quite rightly insist that UBC has a responsibility to ensure safety and good order on campus for controversial speakers. UBC cannot, consistently with its own expressed principles, allow threats of disruption to interfere with the peaceful expression and discussion of ideas and arguments.

By assuring Students for Freedom of Expression that they may proceed with Dr Fiamengo's lecture on academic feminism and freedom of expression, UBC would honor its obligation to students, faculty members, and the general public to encourage the kind of thoughtful, open debate that is the hallmark of universities within a democratic society.

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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Cc: Andrew Szeri, Provost and Vice-President, Academic
Ainsley Carry, Vice-President, Students
UBC Safety and Risk Services, Vancouver
Raphael Chang Menoni, UBC Students for Freedom of Expression