

Culture

# UBC postpones free speech event



Diana Davison, 2 weeks ago 6 min read

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The threat to freedom of speech continues on university campuses as administrators struggle to find new ways to deal with security requirements. In B.C., Simon Fraser University and UBC have both failed to host events scheduled in the first week of November after authoritarian groups organized massive protests.

Both speakers are no strangers to controversy. The SFU event featured feminist [Meghan Murphy](#), who recently needed bodyguards and about a dozen uniformed police officers to ensure her safety at a Toronto public library event. At UBC, retired English professor and anti-feminist Dr. Janice Fiamengo (who is an acquaintance of the author) has had many previous events cancelled after protesters used noisemakers to interrupt her speech and, in [more than one](#) instance, [pulled a fire alarm](#) to evacuate the building.

x



[Janice Fiamengo](#)@JaniceFiamengo

The last time I tried to speak about free speech, masked thugs shouting "Fuck Fiamengo" harassed and intimidated attendees, and finally pulled the fire alarm. We're trying again!

# Is there a free speech crisis at universities?

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SPEAKER SERIES:

**Janice Fiamengo, Ph.D.**

Professor of English  
University of Ottawa

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 1  
7PM  
UCU AGORA



Free event  
Open to public

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While Meghan Murphy's event managed to secure another location, which they are not disclosing until shortly before the event, the UBC group, Students for Freedom of Expression (UBCSFE), has postponed the Fiamengo event until January 2020.

The group's [Facebook page](#) stated, "We regretfully inform you that the event 'Is Intersectionality Incompatible with Freedom of Expression?' on November 6th has been postponed following a decision by the UBC Administration."

Speaking for UBCSFE, Raphael Chang Menoni told *The Post Millennial* that UBC has been very proactive in working with the group to find solutions. One of the suggestions both felt appropriate was that protesters should not be permitted to wear masks or facial coverings.

UBC's VP of Students, Ainsley Carry, met with the group in October but did not return a request for comment prior to publication.

The Facebook announcement by UBCSFE assured ticket holders that they "will not be dismantled via violent intimidation tactics" and that they had shared the identity of a violent student protester with the RCMP. The statement claims the student in question is "the leader of UBC Students Against Bigotry" (SAB) and that the man had gone "so far as to block the entrance of our last event and yell assault whenever an attendee tried to pass through." They also claim the group leader had shoved a 90-year-old patron at one of their past events.

In response, the announcement [SAB posted](#) on their own Facebook page that they "won't be divided, intimidated, or silenced. Our work continues!" SAB did not return a request for comment from *The Post Millennial*.

UBC's Provost had previously issued a clear [statement](#) regarding the university's commitment to freedom of expression.

"Over hundreds of years, universities have played a central role in providing a forum where ideas can be expressed, debated, and challenged, and where participants can gain insight and greater mutual understanding. Through this role, they have contributed to a better understanding of the world. UBC is the inheritor of this tradition and has long pursued proactive support for academic freedom and freedom of expression as core values."

UBCFSE says the current postponement appears to be a good faith effort from the university to ensure the safety of both event attendees and the protesters after [RCMP had to be called in](#) during their October 2019 event.

Speaking to *The Post Millennial*, Dr. Fiamengo reflected on her lengthy experience with protest groups, which she points out have been a problem on university campuses for many years.

Fiamengo said that past attempts to give protesters time and space to express their concerns as part of the events have been unsuccessful. She said “[the protesters] don’t believe in that. That would be a form of dialogue.” She pointed out that, to many of the protesters, “there is no distinction between speech and violence” and they feel no amount of counterspeech can undo the perceived “violence” of her words.

One of the problems is that the protesters don’t usually articulate their viewpoints, choosing instead to chant slogans that primarily label everyone present as a “fascist.” In Fiamengo’s experience, the protesters don’t always know who the event speaker is and have been unable to identify what the person had said that was objectionable.

Fiamengo noted that at other events student protesters had admitted they came to the event because their professors told them to attend and that members of the faculty had been playing a role in generating disruption of certain kinds of speech they personally found offensive.

Fiamengo said it was difficult if not impossible to engage with most protesters as “they don’t have an argument and they don’t have a position.” In her experience, the protest organizers would choose a specific quotation as the basis for their indignation then rally outrage to shut down an entire lecture.

Fiamengo said she is most deeply concerned about “the manner in which the equation of speech with violence ends up preventing all sorts of people from being able to explore ideas that they’re interested in.” In particular, Fiamengo claimed “intersectional feminism has a lockdown on how courses are taught now in the Humanities and the Social Sciences faculties” and she believes that young men aren’t getting the support they need to address serious concerns about subjects such as the high rates of male suicide and homelessness.

In the current age of moral panic and internet outrage, Fiamengo didn’t foresee any solution to deplatforming in the near future.

Overall, it seems that the core purpose behind public speaking events has been lost on today’s angry mobs who often haven’t bothered to read the material they are objecting to. Regarding lectures, Fiamengo pointed out that “the principle is that one person is able to make a cogent argument based on extensive thought and research.” Those ideas require time to unpack and explain and that is the reason why question periods take place *after* the lecture—so that attendees can challenge statements that were actually made during the event with which they may disagree.

This all seems rather obvious but, surprisingly, it holds little weight with some of the groups who organize these protests.

Historically, the best way to challenge ideas has been through structured debate and that requires opponents to first listen to the argument being presented. Perhaps the best solution for universities is to renew a commitment to teaching critical thinking and debate skills instead of caving into emotional outrage groups.

In the meantime, the extra security costs should be borne by all the student groups instead of singular events that have been targeted for protest. After all, the same groups holding the protests

claim they are exercising their free speech as well and, in the modern world, free speech apparently comes at great cost.