



## *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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26 June 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](http://www.safs.ca).)

SAFS has received a report of an unfortunate incident on 10 June at the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls conference, hosted by the University of British Columbia's First Nations House of Learning. UBC philosophy student Franz-Edward Kurtzke was directed to leave the conference and, when he refused, he was arrested by the police and removed. (Mr Kurtzke was released without being charged soon after.)

Our information is that Mr Kurtzke was directed to leave simply because people present at the conference were upset by questions he asked and points he attempted to make. Mr Kurtzke did not, we understand, interrupt or disrupt the conference, he spoke only during a question period and other appropriate times, he was not rude or abusive, and he did not intimidate or threaten anyone, or act in any way that would warrant ejecting him from the conference.

The conference was a public academic event, or so all indications confirm. It was a collaboration between UBC and Georgetown University and held under the auspices of the Provost and Vice-President Academic at UBC. As an academic event, academic norms should prevail. Difficult and unsettling questions and comments should be welcome. Disputation has an honoured place at academic gatherings, for disputation serves to sharpen focus and encourages inquirers to look carefully at evidence and argument.

Removing a scholar or student from an event because he asks upsetting questions or questions that challenge certain premises violates the culture of inquiry central to academic life and

infringes on the academic mission of the university.

If the information we have obtained is correct, the officials who directed Mr Kurtzke to leave the conference failed to understand the nature of an academic event. Have you, as president of UBC, communicated to them that they acted against the interests of the university?

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  
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Neil Guppy, Senior Advisor to the Provosts, Academic Freedom  
Aftab Erfan, Director, Dialogue and Conflict Engagement  
Franz-Edward Kurtzke, Student