



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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17 January 2022

Tim Rahilly, PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor
Mount Royal University
4825 Mount Royal Gate SW
Calgary, AB T3E 6K6

Dear Dr Rahilly,

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.)

According to newspaper reports, in late December, 2021, Mount Royal University dismissed Frances Widdowson from its faculty. Dr Widdowson had been an Associate Professor in Mount Royal's Department of Economics, Justice, and Policy Studies.

Dr Widdowson is a distinguished scholar. She is widely admired for her concern to provide evidence and arguments in support of her claims and to consider closely objections to her claims. Her two published books and her many publications, both scholarly and popular, have discussed important

matters and have prompted thoughtful and interesting discussion. Her work is studied and quoted both inside and outside the academy.

Dr Widdowson is well known for her efforts to promote scholarly values. She is a defender of academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus, both of which are central to the mission of universities. She argues for dispassionate investigation even when ideas are controversial. Dr Widdowson champions critical discussion among people who disagree. She makes the confrontation of ideas central to her service to the scholarly community; her latest edited volume, for instance, brings together different perspectives on the heated topic of indigenizing the university, and many of the debates she organizes feature speakers with contrasting views.

Academics in Canada and internationally were shocked to hear that Mount Royal had fired Dr Widdowson. A university gains much from having on its faculty a professor of Dr

Widdowson's accomplishments and stature. She was a tenured professor any university would be proud of. Such a professor must have violated, repeatedly, centrally important university regulations, and be beyond the possibility of reforming her damaging ways, for a university to sever its relations with her, given the costs that that entails to scholarship, teaching and the care of the academic mission. Mount Royal, one would think, would have to have excellent reasons for removing Dr Widdowson from its community.

What primarily concerns the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship is that there is no public evidence of any good reason for Dr Widdowson's termination.

Newspaper reports tell us only that people are hurt or upset by her views, or by what they take to be her views. For instance, it is reported that 6,000 people signed a petition calling for her to be fired for remarks she made to the *Western Standard* about Black Lives Matter. Critics have threatened to boycott those who publish her books or otherwise are associated with her and have disrupted events in which she has participated. But that people disagree with her on any point cannot constitute a reason to fire her. Indeed, speaking unpopular views is protected by academic freedom. It is also reported that some people think that by speaking her views, she created a toxic environment at Mount Royal. A university's task in such a situation would be to explain that it is professor's duty to disseminate her views and that performing one's academic duty cannot be toxic.

In official statements quoted in reports, Mount Royal implies that it fired Dr Widdowson for harassing colleagues and treating people disrespectfully. Yet there is no example or evidence of unfair treatment of colleagues or students or other bad conduct in the newspaper reports. The people quoted who approve of Mount Royal's actions do not talk about bad conduct. Their complaints are always simply that Dr Widdowson says things they find offensive, upsetting or contrary to policies they advocate. They never describe instances of harassment or other troubling behaviour.

Although those who agitated for Dr Widdowson's termination do not supply evidence that she harassed anyone or created a toxic environment, they have often said that the content of her views, or the fact that she is not shy about stating them publicly or responding to criticism, itself constitutes harassment, by virtue of attacking the identities of people. Is that Mount Royal's position, that by being known to have views at odds with others, Dr Widdowson is guilty of harassment and creating a toxic environment?

Besides violating Dr Widdowson's academic freedom, Mount Royal's decision is out of keeping with university principles of proportional discipline. Even should Mount Royal have cause not yet available publicly to fault Dr Widdowson's behaviour, termination should follow only repeated violations of contractual requirements. To the knowledge of SAFS, Dr Widdowson had only one blemish on her record, a short suspension, itself doubtfully warranted.

Finally, the effects of Mount Royal's actions on academic culture in Canada are seriously worrying. Dr Widdowson seems to have been fired merely for being known to have views some people, some of whom are highly placed, find objectionable. That she was terminated

sends a strong message to professors and students generally not to speak certain views or to make certain arguments. Candid and full discussion of many sensitive topics was difficult enough on Canadian campuses before Dr Widdowson was dismissed. Now, to engage in candid discussion or the play of ideas will be felt to be even more perilous. If Mount Royal sought by firing Dr Widdowson to buttress an ideological orthodoxy on its campus and throughout Canada, it could not have chosen a better means.

SAFS would like to point out that although Dr Widdowson is affiliated with our organization, she has not been involved in the decision to write this letter.

We respectfully request that you respond to the points we have made and the questions we raise. 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 stylized, flowing script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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