



Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship

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4 November 2020

Robert Gordon, PhD
President and Vice-Chancellor
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4

Dear President Gordon,

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 is alarmed at the implications for academic freedom and teaching and research at the University of Windsor of the “University’s Response to Recent Use of Anti-Black Language,” a document posted on the Windsor website on 3 November.

(<https://www.uwindsor.ca/president/sites/uwindsor.ca/president/files/responsetouseofanti-blacklanguage.pdf>.)

The Response falsely asserts that “two instructors used anti-Black language (the n-word) as part of their class.” Mentioning the word is not in itself to say anything against Black people, no more than would discussing race-based slavery or the forms anti-Black racism takes in contemporary society. Neither instructor demeaned or disparaged anyone during their classroom discussions.

The Response says that speaking the word “nigger” is disrespectful to people regardless of the intention with which it was spoken and, thereby, makes a classroom an unsafe, inequitable and unwelcoming place. Speaking that word is not disrespectful. No student in either class was subjected to an indignity, intentional or not. No rights were violated or threatened, no one was harassed, no one was discriminated against. In fact, no one could have suffered an indignity or have been harassed or discriminated against, for in both cases students were in a class with a teacher engaged in the intellectual investigation of a matter at hand.

Students, as aspiring intellectuals, need to be helped to understand the purposes of academic endeavours and to acquire the attitudes and habits of researchers and critical discussants. Supposing, as the Response does, that students are fragile and need comforting undercuts the

university's mission to educate them and to foster their intellectual and moral autonomy.

A proper response by the University of Windsor would have affirmed that neither professor did anything wrong and it would have informed the university community that complaints against them are groundless. It would have asserted the importance of academic freedom in enabling professors to discuss openly, candidly and sincerely with their students important topics such as racism. It certainly would not have cast aspersions on the intention and the ability of the professors in question to treat all their students well and fairly. Finally, it would not have painted students as too delicate to engage in serious discussions of troubling matters.

We fear that the Response will have a baleful effect on research, teaching and learning at the University of Windsor. Professors and students will now worry if being candid and sincere will get them into trouble; they might stay away from certain topics or from expressing certain views. They know that their university has officially declared a word to be intrinsically harmful, and for the sake of their standing, they may compromise the integrity of their teaching by letting that false thesis go unchallenged. As well, some students might seek to evade their responsibilities by turning on their teachers, again claiming harm when none exists, expecting the administration to side with them.

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 stylized, cursive script.

Mark Mercer, PhD
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