



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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October 12 2023

Kathleen Massey  
Vice-Provost (Students) University of Lethbridge

## **Re: January 30 2023 Email to Students**

Dear Ms. Massey,

I am writing you as President of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship (SAFS), an association of Canadian scholars committed to the principles of academic freedom and the merit principle. You can read more information about our organization at [www.safs.ca](http://www.safs.ca).

It recently came to the attention of some of our members that you sent an email to students in Dr. Paul Viminitz's classes (PHIL 1000C, PHIL2002C, PHIL3409) in January of this year. In this email you stated correctly that Dr. Viminitz had a right under academic freedom to invite whomever he wishes to speak in his classes on campus. We commend you for making this important point.

However, later in your email you state something that is more troubling. You suggest that students may excuse themselves from attending these lectures if the appearance of the guest lecturer "will cause [the student] harm". Certainly students have a right to excuse themselves from class for all sorts of reasons (subject to university and course policies). However,

we believe that this warning engages in rhetoric that both infantilizes students and catastrophizes an otherwise ordinary university experience. Students are frequently confronted with arguments and ideas that they find discomfiting or upsetting. They may hear debates that challenge their worldview and assumptions about their religion, ethnic background or other cherished understandings. This is a normal part of education. To encourage students not to attend due to discomfort risks students being deprived of a formative experience and may give them the erroneous belief that certain deeply held convictions are unchallengeable in a university environment.

While your email highlights the importance of academic freedom at the outset, your advice to students also undermines this principle. First, it would make this freedom a moot point. The freedom of professors to teach as they see fit would have no meaning without students to teach. Encouraging this group of students to not attend an event due to the harm of hearing different perspectives encourages a situation where Dr. Viminitz's academic freedom has little practical value.

Second, as an administrator, your advice negatively impacts the academic ethos of the university as a whole. It encourages students to oppose those members of the university community who are trying to fulfill the mission of an academic institution, which is the search for truth and the freedom to disseminate it so as to serve the common good. University of Lethbridge administrators are obligated to protect the right of its faculty members to engage in frank discussions about unpopular positions and controversial matters, and your email implies that doing this is not valued at the institution. On the contrary, it supports the subversion of this objective principle and defers to the anti-intellectual stance that raising challenging questions and countering authoritative positions can be “harmful”.

We ask that you consider the importance of not interfering with academic freedom in this way for the good of the University of Lethbridge’s academic mission and the good of the students that you serve.

Sincerely,

Robert G Thomas  
President, Society of Academic Freedom and Scholarship

Attachment: Image of January 30 2023 email sent to students.

CC: Dr. Paul Viminiz  
Dr. Digvir S. Jayas, President and Vice-Chancellor  
Dr. Michelle Helstein, Provost and Vice-President Academic  
Honourable Rajan Sawhney, Minister of Advanced Education