



# *Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship*

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31 January 2023

Michael J. Mahon, PhD  
President and Vice-Chancellor  
The University of Lethbridge  
4401 University Drive  
Lethbridge, AB T1K 3M4

Dear President Mahon,

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

Your statement on Monday 26 January 2023, “Statement from the President – Controversial Guest Speaker Appearance,” violated the important principle of institutional neutrality (see the [Kalven Report](#) for a discussion) by describing Frances Widdowson’s views as “in conflict with a number of values held by the University” and by (falsely) suggesting that Dr Widdowson “seek[s] to minimize the significant and detrimental impact of Canada’s residential schools system.” A university performs its social mission by enabling competing interpretations and views to be heard and debated. When the university itself states a position on a matter of controversy, it renders itself inhospitable to robust and candid debate. The

university must remain neutral so that scholars, students and all other interested parties can discuss matters freely and openly in their search for truth.

Nonetheless, in your 26 January statement, you properly and firmly rejected calls to cancel Dr Widdowson’s talk, “How ‘Woke-ism’ Threatens Academic Freedom,” a talk organized by university of Lethbridge philosophy professor Paul Viminitz. In that statement, you affirmed the “commitment” of the University of Lethbridge “to protect free inquiry and scholarship [and] facilitate access to scholarly resources....” You added that “Guest speakers ... are afforded the same commitment to freedom of expression as members of our campus community.” Those who object to Dr Widdowson’s views may voice their disagreement, “but they may not obstruct or interfere with others’ freedom of expression. Debate or deliberation on campus may not be suppressed because the ideas put forward are thought by some, or even most, to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or misguided.”

Despite the violation of the principle of institutional neutrality in the 26 January statement, you and the University of Lethbridge would have acted well and commendably were that the end of the matter. In ensuring that Dr Widdowson may speak on campus and explaining the University of Lethbridge's commitment to academic values and its academic mission, you would have performed your duties as a university president well.

Unfortunately, on 30 January, you updated your statement by retracting it and cancelling Dr Widdowson's scheduled talk.

In doing so, you have expressed disdain for discussion and debate and violated Dr Viminitz's right, as a professor at the University of Lethbridge, to fair use of university resources. (Both Dr Widdowson and Dr Viminitz are on the Board of Directors of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship. They have recused themselves from SAFS involvement in this case.)

Nothing that you mention in your 30 January statement justifies your action. That some members of the University of Lethbridge community were upset that Dr Widdowson was scheduled to speak should have been held by you to be irrelevant to the university's mission to promote inquiry and discussion. You noted in your 26 January statement that the university may restrict "expression that violates the law, defames an individual, or constitutes a threat or harassment." Dr Widdowson's talk would have done none of these and in your 30 January statement you give no reason for thinking it would.

As a professor at Lethbridge, Dr Viminitz may invite speakers to campus and organize public talks featuring guests of the university. Cancelling Dr Widdowson's talk is tantamount to violating Dr Viminitz's academic freedom. It is also to deny the many members of the university community who wished to hear Dr Widdowson speak on campus the opportunity to do so.

You mention "harm associated with this talk," harm independent of defamation, threat or harassment. In doing so, you stretch the concept of harm so thin and wide that just about anything is covered by it. Anyone who wishes to shut down a talk in the future need only mention harm and you will be unable to find a principle by which to allow the talk to proceed.

That, as you claim, "this talk is an impediment to meaningful reconciliation" is not only false but dangerous, for it militates against openness and candour in discussions of reconciliation. Reconciliation, which, admirable as it may be, is not an academic value, must respect freedom of expression and academic freedom if it is to be mutual and lasting.

Cancelling Dr Widdowson's talk is an outrage that will stain the University of Lethbridge for years.

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, sweeping underline.

Mark Mercer, PhD  
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