

Iain T. Benson writes:

Office of the Vice-President, Academic
Acadia University,
Wolfville,
Nova Scotia,
Canada

Dear Heather Hemming:

Re: The Role of a University and University Leaders in a Time of increasing Polarization and Fear: Why the Clear Protection of Free Speech and Diversity of Opinions is Essential on a University Campus.

As a Canadian living and employed as a full Professor of Law in two countries outside of Canada and a former visiting Professor and Research Fellow at two Canadian Universities and a Fellow of Institutes relating to Law in a number of other countries, I would like to raise something with you.

At Conferences and lectures recently in the UK, Australia and in South Africa questions have been raised about why the Canadian academic environment has become so apparently closed to free speech and diversity of moral viewpoints and why university leaders seem to lack courage and leadership to say anything public about it.

In short the question seems to be this: where is Canadian academic leadership and why is it so seemingly cowed by contemporary political movements that attack freedom on campuses?

Do you have a response that can comfort those of us who have studied liberty and law and see both in trouble in Canadian universities and wider Canadian society?

Whether the widespread threatening of the status or activities of certain student groups, the threats to academic teachers or to accreditation itself, Canada is a worrying scene.

The pending decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in the Trinity Western University case (argued December 2017) while dealing with the wider issue of accreditation, raises the entailed question as to why the Canadian academic establishment is so weak in clearly, firmly and publicly defending genuine diversity and civil liberties against current attackers?

Canadian Law Deans, amongst other elite groups, exhibited, unanimously and embarrassingly, a shockingly pusillanimous esprit des corps in relation to Trinity Western University. One hopes the highest court will follow the British Columbia and Nova Scotia courts in supporting diversity of opinion there but the fact that so many at the highest levels of the legal and academic establishments failed to see the dangers to genuine diversity is a most worrying sign of the times.

Many will watch Acadia closely to see if it, and you, will do the correct thing here in relation to Professor Mehta and others like him as the juggernaut of identity politics increases speed.

The howling of mobs and the politics of fear and decontextualised arguments about “equality” have no place on a University campus worthy of the title of “higher learning”. Make no mistake: free speech is in trouble in Canada and many around the world know this and are watching to see if responsible leadership emerges from other than the judiciary to stop the well entrenched ideologues.

Please act decisively and courageously at Acadia University to lay out the principles of academic freedom, diversity of viewpoint and the importance of open discussion, disagreement and adult debate to a university and the wider society in which it has or should have a most important leadership role.

You may find the July 2012 statement of principle from the University of Chicago a good starting point for principled articulation at Acadia: <https://freeexpression.uchicago.edu/.../statement-principles-...>

Please feel free to circulate this electronic letter to your University Executive and to those concerned about this issue at your University.

Yours Sincerely,

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