

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



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August 21, 2017

Dear Dean Averill,

Our department Head, Paul Bartha, has just forwarded your message about the flyer concerning free speech that has been distributed by a student around the UBC campus. I was first made aware of this situation by my colleague Alan Richardson, who emailed us a picture of one page of the flyer (as attached). Professor Richardson's email message was followed up with an email from another colleague, Professor Carrie Jenkins. She asked Professor Bartha "what is the [Philosophy] department doing about this?" Your analysis of this situation, in your own email, says that "the invitation to report on what others are doing and saying could be interpreted as an effort to stifle the expression of ideas." That is, you appear to endorse the view that there is something "threatening" about this flyer – i.e. threatening to UBC faculty - and that the student concerned is, to this extent, violating UBC's principles and values concerning free speech.

I do not know who the student or students involved may be. I know nothing about other emails or possible harassing or disrespectful behaviour or conduct (i.e. as alluded to in the *Ubysses* article). I cannot, therefore, comment on these matters without more information. What I do want to comment on, however, is the claim that the flyer itself is in some way threatening (to faculty who take ideological views different from those of the student/students concerned).

The writer of the flyer recommends some online articles (by well-known figures - Haidt, Harris, et al) and invites others to join a society concerned about free speech issues (I also know nothing about this particular society). As you point out in your own reply, there is nothing about this that can or should be construed as threatening (whether one finds the articles and society concerned of interest and value or not). Any effort to suppress this would itself be a clear case of stifling free expression.

Another item that stands out to me, given the concerns raised, is the last item, which asks its readers to do what they can "to encourage UBC to endorse the Chicago Principles". Here is a link to the Chicago Principles:

<https://freexpression.uchicago.edu/page/statement-principles-free-expression>

It says there:

"Fundamentally, however, the University is committed to the principle that it may not restrict debate or deliberation because the ideas put forth are thought to be offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed. It is for the members of the University community to make those judgments for themselves.

As a corollary to this commitment, members of the University community must also act in conformity with this principle. Although faculty, students and staff are free to criticize, contest and condemn the views expressed on campus, they may not obstruct, disrupt, or otherwise interfere with the freedom of others to express views they reject or even loathe."

I believe that we should welcome and support the actions and activities of any student who is willing to defend and follow these principles - which seem generally consistent with UBC's own principles that you have referred us to in your own response.

The only basis for any objection to this flyer rests, therefore, with the invitation to report "truth or social justice type" issues to President Ono or to Neil Guppy, Senior Advisor to the Provosts, Academic Freedom. Your own letter suggests that for some this invitation will evoke "memories of campuses with blacklists and a climate of intimidation". Your remarks in your letter also suggest that you believe that there is some understandable basis for regarding this "invitation" as a *threat* to faculty. If this is the case, then I think you have the situation entirely the wrong way round.

Since the writer of the flyer makes clear that she/he endorses the Chicago Principles, the only reasonable interpretation of the invitation to report "truth and social justice issues" is that some members of the university believe that our own (UBC) principles of free speech may be violated and that such violations, if and when they occur, should be reported to the appropriate university officials responsible for protecting and preserving freedom of speech and expression on our campus. It is too ironic, I suggest, that a student encouraging others to report violations of free speech, to the relevant and appropriate officials at UBC, is being charged with violating these principles just by doing this.

From any reasonable perspective, if there is any "intimidation" going on here, it is by *senior faculty* who are trying to silence and suppress *undergraduate students* who have

(legitimate and reasonable) concerns about free speech issues at UBC. Your own stance is at best, unclear on this matter and, more worryingly, could be read as endorsing the claim that the flyer is objectionable because it invites others to report free speech violations to appropriate university authorities. Read this way, your response would leave undergraduates, who perceive such a threat to their own freedom and the integrity of the university, with no effective channels to protect themselves and, indeed, would subject them to possible *further* restrictions and reprisals by senior faculty and officials on the ground that taking such action is itself perceived as "threatening" to our faculty.

I entirely appreciate that this is a highly charged and complex matter and that you have tried, in your own response, to display sensitivity to the various concerns and parties involved. Having said this, for the reasons outlined above, in my view your response is unclear and evasive on some key issues. In particular, your remarks could be construed as *defending* the suggestion that the flyer that was distributed was in some way objectionable and in violation of our UBC standards. This gives credence to the very concerns about free speech at UBC that the flyer raises. Given this, I would encourage you to review and revise your remarks to the faculty in a way that clarifies your position and that does not further exacerbate what is already a worrying situation about the freedom of our students to raise legitimate concerns about free speech at UBC. If you are not willing to do this, then I would encourage more senior administrators at UBC, who are directly responsible for overseeing this matter, to review this case carefully.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Russell

Paul Russell
(Professor)