

NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION
of SCHOLARS

18 June 2020

Dr. Lesley Cormack
Dean of Arts
University of Alberta
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Dear Dean Cormack,

I write to express my concern about your treatment of Kathleen Lowrey, associate professor in Anthropology. The University of Alberta removed Professor Lowrey from her position as Anthropology's associate chair of undergraduate programs. This action followed the complaints of a handful of students who disagree with Professor Lowrey's scientific view that humans are as a species sexually binary. This is not a matter of Lowrey's personal opinion. It is well established as biological fact, and its accuracy is not at risk from the existence of rare intersex conditions, same-sex attraction, or body dysmorphia.

We are all aware of the contentious politics surrounding transgenderism and other ideological positions on the extent to which gender is socially constructed. These matters should have no bearing on Lowrey's scholarship, teaching, or counsel to students.

Judging that her expression of simple biological fact creates an 'unsafe environment' for students is a mistake. Students are perfectly safe in hearing such elemental facts, and perfectly free to pretend the facts are otherwise. But the university does make itself into an 'unsafe environment' by acceding to ardent demands that truth be suppressed and falsehood or fantasy be privileged. Educating students in a manner that accommodates either delusory beliefs or political shibboleths disserves them. Perpetuating ignorance is what makes a university unsafe.

Removing Professor Lowrey from her position is also a blow to academic freedom at the University of Alberta. It communicates to all faculty members that responsible expression of accurate information can and will be punished if doing so irritates enough students or academic administrators.

I urge you to reverse course on this decision. The University of Alberta will not benefit either in reputation or in substance if it becomes known as a place that is hostile to intellectual freedom, and especially not if that hostility is based on the desire to avoid offending politically motivated actors.

I write as President of the National Association of Scholars (NAS). NAS is a network of mostly U.S. scholars and citizens united by our commitment to academic freedom, disinterested scholarship, and excellence in higher education. As part of our mission, we support intellectual freedom throughout North America. We have more than thirty years of experience in advocating for the principles of intellectual freedom. (For further information, please see www.nas.org.)

I write partly in the spirit of reminding you that your actions have caught the attention of academics far beyond your campus.

I am aware that in your reply to Mark Mercer, President of the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship, that you stated that Professor Lowrey continues in her position as a professor.¹ That response is irrelevant. Professor Lowrey has lost her administrative position, and that punishment chills academic freedom. Moreover, once the University of Alberta accepts that *perceptions of an 'unsafe environment'* bear on academic policy, it will inevitably succumb to calls to subordinate the protection of tenure to the imperatives of 'safety.' At best, your policy will allow a few condemned heretics to linger on in tenured positions, and ensure that no new hires be allowed to publicly controvert any dogma that claims 'safety' to secure incontrovertibility.

I am also aware that you stated that "For privacy reasons, we cannot comment on the status of any one individual's administrative appointment."² I do not ask you to comment on Professor Lowrey's administrative status. I call upon you, and the University of Alberta, to restore her to her position.

I write as head of a large association of academics, but I add that I am also an anthropologist and a former tenured professor in my discipline at Boston University. The idea that as an anthropologist I would *have to* teach that humans are not sexually binary is appalling.

I realize that you are about to move as of July 1 to a new position as Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Principal of University of British Columbia, Okanagan.³ It would be commendable on your part if you cleaned this matter up while you have the chance rather than leave it for your successor.

As a veteran of letters like this, I know that college officials often avoid answering in a meaningful way. My recourse is to publish my letters after a due period.

Respectfully yours,



Peter Wood
President
National Association of Scholars

¹ Lesley Cormack to Mark Mercer, June 9, 2020, <https://www.safs.ca/issuescases/alberta-anthropology/Response%20to%20SAFS%20letter%20from%20Lesley%20Cormack.pdf>.

² Cormack to Mercer.

³ "UBC announces new Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Principal of Okanagan campus," February 14, 2020, UBC News, <https://news.ubc.ca/2020/02/14/ubc-announces-new-deputy-vice-chancellor-and-principal-of-okanagan-campus/>.