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THE GENDER IDENTITY DEBATE AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM AT SIMON
FRASER

Rachel Altman and Mark Collard

On November 2, 2019, a panel discussion entitled “How Media Bias Shapes the Gender Identity Debate” was held at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Vancouver. The event was originally a collaborative endeavour involving Mark Collard and a group of local feminists that was supposed to be held at Simon Fraser University (SFU). However, the reaction to the proposed event escalated to the point that Mark decided he had no choice other than to cancel the room booking at SFU. That a professor was forced to abandon an event on campus due to safety concerns raises important questions about the exercise of academic freedom at SFU. Here, we discuss the event and the reactions to it, and outline actions that we think SFU’s senior administrators need to take to shore up academic freedom at the university.

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We first want to point out that academic freedom is supposed to be a core value at SFU. In a [statement](#) released in 2011, the current president explained that “when disputes arise in our university around major social and political issues, we should err on the side of tolerating free speech. Provided such speech does not overstep legal boundaries, it should not be censored even though it may be provocative or offensive.” In line with this statement, the [collective agreement](#) that governs the employment conditions of faculty members guarantees academic freedom. SFU also has an annual [award](#) that is intended to “honour and encourage work that provokes and/or contributes to the understanding of controversy”. However, as we hope will become clear, the reaction to the event

has revealed a gap between SFU's stated position on academic freedom and the reality of attempting to exercise that freedom.

"How Media Bias Shapes the Gender Identity Debate" featured three writers who have covered the gender identity debate: Meghan Murphy (SFU alum, journalist, and founder of *Feminist Current*), Jonathan Kay (current Canadian editor of *Quillette*), and Anna Slatz (reporter for *The Post Millennial*). The panel was moderated by Lindsay Shepherd (SFU alum, Campus Free Speech Fellow at the [Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms](#), and Investigative Journalism Fellow at the [True North Centre for Public Policy](#)). The goal of the event was to consider the way the media have dealt with the discussion about gender identity and transgender rights, especially the impact of gender self-ID legislation on the rights and interests of natal women.

Opposition erupted soon after the event was announced. Various SFU groups called for its cancellation, including the [Simon Fraser Student Society](#), the [Graduate Student Society](#), the [Teaching Support Staff Union](#), and [Out on Campus](#). Some SFU faculty also demanded cancellation via an online [petition](#). In addition, the student newspaper ran an [article](#) arguing that the event should be shut down. The main argument for cancellation was that, by hosting the event, SFU would be amplifying and bolstering anti-trans ideology and thereby supporting hate speech. Some individuals further asserted that academic freedom does not oblige a university to host speakers invited by a faculty member or student group; de-platforming, they claimed, is not censorship but rather "responsible curation". Others claimed that academic freedom should cover only a professor's area of expertise and suggested that Mark is not sufficiently qualified to host a panel on gender identity.

Other disturbing reactions occurred as well. For example, discussion about the event was censored on the primary email list of Academic Women, a university-funded organization that is supposed to represent the hundreds of female academics at SFU. Specifically, the head of Academic Women initiated and allowed messages that condemned the panel discussion but then shut down the list when some members replied that they favoured the event's taking place, or simply supported academic freedom. Her rationale was the non sequitur "[t]rans lives are not up for debate". Equally worryingly, the leadership of the faculty union released a statement expressing solidarity with SFU's trans faculty members but did not publicly express support for academic freedom.

Despite the activists' pressure, SFU's senior administrators remained firm in their commitment to academic freedom, and the event was set to go ahead as planned. In response, a number of groups planned to demonstrate outside the building in which the event was to be held, including [Out on Campus](#), the [Coalition Against Trans Antagonism](#) (CATA), and [UBC Students Against Bigotry](#). In total, several hundred people were expected to protest the event.

For several weeks, SFU's campus safety unit believed that the event could proceed safely. However, two days prior to the event, Mark was informed by the

unit's director, Tim Marron, that his team's assessment had changed. Mr. Marron reported that, at a meeting the previous day, CATA had stated that they intended to engage in direct action, including physical disruption, property damage, and fire alarm activation. Mr. Marron explained that his team had concluded that the probability of the event's ending in violence was now very high. Based on this revised risk assessment, Mark decided to cancel the room booking, which meant that the other organizers had to scramble to find a new venue. Meanwhile, the head of Academic Women publicly celebrated, euphemistically tweeting about the "[fantastic organizing on the ground](#)" that led to the cancellation of the event.

Fortunately, the Pan Pacific was able to provide a room at short notice and the event took place as scheduled. Contrary to the advance scaremongering, none of the panelists incited hatred or violence against trans people. Rather, as is clear from the [video recording](#) of the complete event, they presented reasoned positions on the sometimes conflicting rights and interests of natal women and trans women—for example, in the context of sports, washrooms, change rooms, rape shelters, and prisons. Ironically, the only hate on display in connection with the event was directed towards the panelists, attendees, and police by the individuals who protested outside (see, for example, the accompanying photo and the video in this [tweet](#)). Indeed, one of the panelists, Meghan Murphy, was surrounded at all times by three bodyguards because of the threats she had received.

We are pleased that the event went ahead in the end. However, we are deeply concerned that it could not be held at SFU, especially given that one of the central missions of a university is to foster open, respectful debate. SFU's senior administrators must take steps to reduce the likelihood that future events have to be cancelled on safety grounds and commit to taking active measures to support academic freedom in the face of threats. Specifically, an audit of the buildings on SFU's three campuses should be conducted to identify rooms that can be adequately secured if protests are threatened and the resulting list should be made available to university members so that they can make an informed decision when organizing events. Furthermore, a review of SFU's policies regarding the remit of its security staff and the circumstances in which other security personnel and the police can operate on campus is required. Based on Mark's conversations with the campus safety unit, we understand that SFU security staff are not allowed to use force and that outside security professionals are not allowed to operate on campus. Meanwhile, the police will not enter SFU premises unless an incident is in progress and they have been notified. The problems with these arrangements are obvious and need to be addressed.

SFU's senior administration must also ensure that all individuals occupying positions of institutional power act in ways that respect academic freedom. While the President and Vice-President Academic publicly supported academic freedom in relation to the event, other individuals in official positions did not. The most obvious example is the head of Academic Women, who, as we explained

earlier, censored discussion about the event on the group's primary email list. We call on the senior administration to issue guidance to office holders on upholding academic freedom in practice. For instance, moderators of all SFU-sponsored online groups must ensure that members are free to express their opinions (within the limits set by the law).

Finally, SFU's senior administrators need to address a problem that was revealed by the on-campus reaction to the event—namely, that many of the university's professors and students appear not to understand the principle of academic freedom. Academic freedom is often framed solely in terms of the right of academics to research, teach, or communicate about topics that interest them without fear of reprisal by university officials or the government, but this picture is incomplete. Crucially, academic freedom also involves tolerating opinions different from one's own and expressing disagreement with those opinions via debate rather than calling for the cancellation of events or threatening violence. SFU's senior administration needs to identify ways of encouraging all members of the university to (re)embrace this norm.

The open exploration of ideas is one of the fundamental purposes of a university. Those who believe their views are the only ones that are moral or legitimate are operating in direct opposition to this purpose. As we have seen, allowing this attitude to prevail can lead to mobbing and even threats of violence. Instead, to preserve the value of universities, we must defend plurality of opinion and resist censorship.

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Protester outside the Pan Pacific Hotel in Vancouver inviting “TERFs” (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and SWERFs (sex worker exclusionary radical feminists) to “step right up” to a mock guillotine.