University of Saskatchewan Faculty and Staff Members in support of an anti-racist and anti-oppressive institution

A Response to Peter MacKinnon's "The University of Saskatchewan is on an ideological mission" in the National Post: https://nationalpost.com/opinion/peter-mackinnon-the-university-of-saskatchewan-is-on-an-ideological-mission-it-needs-to-end and the Star Phoenix: https://thestarphoenix.com/opinion/peter-mackinnon-the-university-of-saskatchewan-must-end-its-ideological-mission.

We are witnessing a growing backlash against equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives—referred to as DEI in the United States. Under the direction of the second Trump Administration, DEI programs have been systematically dismantled across the U.S., with universities at the forefront of these efforts. Institutions have been ordered to terminate DEI initiatives or risk losing federal funding, representing a major blow to academic freedom and independence. In Canada, the Conservative Party mirrored this agenda during its recent, unsuccessful bid for federal leadership. In Alberta, the United Conservative Party (UCP) has pledged to eliminate EDI programs throughout the public sector and beyond and the provincial government has introduced legislation to grant itself the authority to restrict federal research funding for projects it deems "ideologically left-leaning."

At the University of Alberta, EDI has been replaced with a new framework focused on "access, community, and belonging," and while university leadership maintains that this shift represents an "evolution" rather than a departure from inclusive goals, many faculty members view it as a broader rollback of EDI principles. This change in language parallels similar moves at institutions like the University of Southern Mississippi and is seen by critics as acquiescing to the broader "anti-woke" movement. Pressure on Canadian universities to move away from EDI, has not merely come from governments, however, it has also emerged from within the university sector by those who see it as an assault on their individual academic freedom. Four faculty members and a recent PhD graduate student from the University of British Columbia have petitioned the BC Supreme Court to remove policies on EDI and land acknowledgements.

Peter MacKinnon's recent opinion piece, published in the *National Post*, takes aim at EDI efforts in Canadian universities, particularly targeting the University of Saskatchewan's recent implementation of anti-racism/anti-oppression training. MacKinnon served as the president of the University of Saskatchewan for 13 years and this is not his first attack on the University's equity-related initiatives. He seems to have been given a platform within the *National Post* through which to wield his "anti-woke" sword, a wielding that is not without impact in an institutional environment that is more and more skittish toward equity initiatives. On the topic of his attack on current efforts at the University of Saskatchewan, MacKinnon's position incidentally reveals the precise reason why we need such trainings and conversations in the first place.

MacKinnon repeatedly characterizes the training as "propaganda," "authoritarian," and "ideological." Critics of equity initiatives often cast them as threats to neutrality, truth, and reason. In

reality, unconscious bias training and similar initiatives are evidence-based programs, developed to highlight the failures of perceived "neutrality" and reveal truths about the imbalance of power favouring white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurotypical, and other privileged identities. Missing from such critiques, of course, is any acknowledgement of the proven systemic barriers that have historically excluded Indigenous, Black, people of colour, queer, people with disabilities, women, and other equity-deserving groups from positions of authority, and likewise have excluded the histories and experiences of these same groups from being subjects of study in University halls.

MacKinnon objects to anti-racism training by arguing that it "rests on the proposition that a white majority population has perpetrated a wide and pervasive racist agenda against others." The irony here is that he's right; deep and sustained racism is alive and well in Canada and there is no shortage of evidence of this fact, contrary to what MacKinnon claims. The problem lies in his dismissal of this reality, from which he remains a noteworthy benefactor, and his decision to publicly critique a training he has neither experienced nor meaningfully engaged with. This act reflects the white privilege that anti-racism training seeks to unpack.

MacKinnon further argues that anti-racism training "disparages merit," while the history of Canadian universities shows that merit has never been a neutral concept. Merit has always been shaped by colonial, gendered, and racialized systems of access and reward. The point of anti-racist training is not to discard merit, then, but to improve it by revealing the many people who are and have long been excluded by biased institutionalized practices of merit and evaluation. It is worth noting that at the University of Saskatchewan, as in all publicly funded Canadian universities, faculty hiring, promotion, tenure, and salary decisions are guided by formal frameworks for evaluating merit. To our knowledge, there is no proposal to eliminate or alter these frameworks. The claim that anti-racism training undermines merit is not only unfounded, it's a well-worn and deeply flawed straw argument.

Perhaps most disappointing, MacKinnon frames anti-racism training as an attack on academic freedom. But academic freedom is not the right to remain ignorant of systemic inequity, nor is it the right to resist institutional change designed to make universities more inclusive and accountable. Academic freedom is the freedom to inquire rigorously into the forces that shape our world, including those that reproduce inequity. It is also the freedom for historically underrepresented scholars and students to pursue their work in environments free from hostility and exclusion. Counter to McKinnon's cherry-picking assertion of "authoritarianism," Canadian universities already mandate faculty and staff to take many types of training throughout their careers, including health and safety.

MacKinnon's response, therefore, is not a defense of academic freedom; it is a defense of a select population maintaining power and status in the face of changes to institutions which have long upheld their positions of power. The training at the University of Saskatchewan emerged through collective bargaining between the University administration and the faculty union, approved by the Board of Governors, and ratified by faculty, indicating that it was a request supported by a large number of faculty, by Senior Administrators who negotiated the terms with the Association, and by the Board of Governors. Further, anti-racism training is not about suppressing dissent but about fostering a baseline of cultural awareness and humility in a diverse public institution. This training is about ensuring faculty have equal access to knowledge and critical perspectives. Just as we expect professors to have expertise in their disciplines, we can expect them to understand the social and cultural dynamics that impact their students, colleagues, and communities, and to develop their research and teaching portfolios accordingly. That is the kind of University of Saskatchewan that the world needs.

The University of Saskatchewan is trying, however imperfectly, to live up to its responsibilities to students, faculty, staff, and society, and we are grateful that President Peter Stoicheff's office also released a

statement in response to MacKinnon's article, and in support of the university's anti-racism training. As backlash against equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives continues to grow, it is essential that we speak out. Not only to oppose this backlash, but to herald the positive outcomes of inclusive, community-building efforts such as these. Consequently, as faculty and staff at the University of Saskatchewan, we, the undersigned are proud to be part of a university that prioritizes anti-racist and anti-oppressive education, and we affirm our commitment to EDI work at every level. Rather than fearing this shift, we welcome it as a sign that Canadian universities are finally working hard at becoming what they were always meant to be: places of transformation, inclusion, discovery, and growth.

Signed:
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