

July 10, 2024

Dear Dean O'Brien:

We, members of the SFU Academic Freedom Group¹ and other concerned faculty members, understand that you are currently seeking feedback on the proposal for a Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) at SFU. We are writing to express concern that the proposed FGS would impinge on academic freedom at SFU.

Specifically, the FAQs say

A Faculty of Graduate Studies will guide programs in their work of embedding the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion as well as Indigenization and decolonization principles and practices as a part of the work we all do at SFU.

Of course faculty members are obliged to follow SFU's human rights and research ethics policies. However, faculty members are *not* obliged to engage in prescribed equity, diversity, inclusion, Indigenization, or decolonization work. According to the [SFU/SFUFA Collective Agreement](#), faculty members have "freedom in the conduct of teaching" and "freedom in undertaking research". Similarly, we are guaranteed the freedom to "examine, question, teach, and learn...without reference to prescribed doctrine". The FAQs suggest that the proposed FGS would impose particular principles and practices on faculty members, which would violate the Collective Agreement.

Similarly, on p. 3, the proposal discusses

collegially-informed consideration of new academic standards (e.g., course unit assignment, candidacy requirements, embedding and upholding the principles of Truth and Reconciliation as well as equity, diversity and inclusion in graduate education and research)

and states

Moreover, it will provide academic units with curricular and policy-related guidance to ensure that principles of Truth and Reconciliation and equity, diversity and inclusion are upheld in graduate education and research (e.g., via a set of guidelines to be implemented by academic units as appropriate).

Again, faculty members are not required to embed such principles in our teaching and research. Moreover, discipline experts are normally charged with determining academic standards and curricula for their field; we are deeply concerned by the suggestion that the proposed FGS could override those decisions if they do not conform to a particular political philosophy.

¹ The Academic Freedom Group works to promote open inquiry, viewpoint diversity, and constructive disagreement on campus.

The proposal (p. 8) also states

The INS [Individualized Interdisciplinary Studies graduate program] attracts many Indigenous graduate students because Indigenous systems of knowledge(s) are inherently interdisciplinary and because of this it is a safe space to conduct research.

The term “safe space” is worrisome in its ambiguity. Presumably it refers to something other than physical safety and freedom from discrimination, bullying, harassment (which are already guaranteed under SFU policy and BC law). But its intended meaning is not defined in the document. The term “safe space” can sometimes be used to mean “a place where views are not challenged”. Research inherently involves the rigorous interrogation of ideas; it cannot be conducted in an environment that protects some ideas from critical inquiry. Moreover, such an environment would threaten the academic freedom of faculty members who wish to question “protected” ideas.

Finally, the proposal (p. 7) states that

...individuals who are registered as supervisors will receive training on topics relevant to supervision (e.g., the use of AI in theses, RA funding) and opportunities to attend workshops and other PD sessions. [emphasis added]

This language implies that mandatory training would be imposed on supervisors, which could lead to violations of academic freedom if the training promotes certain ideologies or doctrines (not to mention an increase in supervisors’ workloads).

In light of the potential overreach of authority that could occur given the current phrasing of the proposal (and FAQs), we ask that you:

1. Remove all references to equity, diversity, inclusion, Indigenization, and decolonization from these documents.
2. Clarify the meaning of “safe space” as it is used in the proposal.
3. Specify that training will be optional and that supervisors will be allowed to choose training modules that are relevant to their needs and interests.

We also ask that you strengthen the Vision, Mission, and Values statements (p. 6), which are currently superficial and vague, to reflect the academic mission of SFU and the critical importance of academic freedom to achieving that mission. In particular, we suggest the following revised language:

- **Vision:** To be the hub of support for excellence in graduate education and research.
- **Mission:** We support and connect the SFU graduate community in our shared pursuit of SFU’s academic mission (the generation and transmission of knowledge). We help graduate students to develop academic skills and to realize their academic aspirations.

- **Values:**
 - **Committed to Academic Freedom:** We promote and defend the academic freedom, the cornerstone of the academic mission, of graduate students and their supervisors.
 - **Resourceful:** We are a proactive and supportive unit. We develop creative solutions to challenges that graduate students and their supervisors face in this ever-changing academic landscape.
 - **Community-Minded:** We recognize the diversity of our graduate community and work flexibly to help all graduate students achieve their goals.
 - **Collaborative:** When problem-solving, we engage with stakeholders to find common ground and develop balanced outcomes.
 - **Transparent:** We are open and honest in the work we do, building trust and accountability to create a positive work environment.
 - **Respectful:** Embracing a people-first approach, we work hard to support everyone with dignity and understanding.

We respectfully request acknowledgment of receipt of this letter and a response to our concerns.