



**Open letter to the UBC community from Dr. Martha C. Piper
October 15, 2015**

UBC “missed an important opportunity to vindicate the principle of academic freedom” in the days following the Aug. 8, 2015 publication of a blogpost by Montalbano Professor in Leadership Studies: Gender and Diversity, Jennifer Berdahl.

That quote, from the fact-finding report of the Honourable Lynn Smith, Q.C., perfectly captures my own disappointment about the events in question. At a time when a faculty member felt under attack, no one at the University stepped forward to reassure her that her academic freedom was – and is – beyond question. That was a lost opportunity and will be the basis for a series of changes that I hope will guarantee that no such oversight occurs again in the future.

In the circumstances at hand, the former UBC Dean of Law and B.C. Supreme Court Justice Smith determined in a thorough review that no one individual acting on his or her own ever actually interfered with Dr. Berdahl’s academic freedom. At all times, and in accordance with the protections set out in the UBC Faculty Association Collective Agreement, Dr. Berdahl was free “to teach and to learn unhindered by external or non-academic constraints, [and] to engage in full and unrestricted consideration of any opinion.”

But the Collective Agreement – and the UBC Academic Calendar – have a higher standard, as well. It is that, “All members of the University must recognize this fundamental principle (of academic freedom) and must share responsibility for supporting, safeguarding and preserving this central freedom.”

In this light, as Professor Smith says, “academic freedom can be threatened not only by acts, but also by failures to act.”

That’s what happened here – a failure to act. At a time when Dr. Berdahl “felt reprimanded, silenced and isolated,” no one at the University stepped up to say that, regardless of what they felt about the merits of her position, she was – and remains – perfectly entitled to hold it with vigour, and security.

I have met with Dr. Berdahl and expressed my regret that the University did not meet its obligations in this matter. I conveyed our respect for her scholarship, and told her that we look forward to her ongoing contributions in the field of gender and diversity, her area of expertise. I have also been working with others in senior administration on a series of measures that will reinforce UBC’s absolute commitment to academic freedom.



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To that end, I would like to solicit your support. Academic freedom is at the very heart of the university's ability to do its job. It is a fundamental tenet in the social contract between Canadian society and our institutions of teaching, learning, and research. If we cannot - with absolute freedom - question everything from the most fundamental precepts of science to the most awkward and controversial positions of politics and society, we will lose our ability to advance human knowledge and understanding.

But protecting academic freedom demands both a degree of courage and a commitment to collaboration - involving every person at every level of the University. It means that each of us must stand up for the rights of people to pursue every argument - including those arguments that we might find abhorrent. It is equally our right, and our responsibility, to challenge those positions, on the basis of good scholarship - the only caveat being that we challenge *what* people say, not their right to say it.

This event, and the Honourable Lynn Smith's incisive and thought-provoking report, present UBC with a learning experience, and one that I can assure you senior administration is taking to heart. It offers us an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to protect the academic freedom of all members of this university.

Martha C. Piper

Interim President and Vice Chancellor