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Professor Stephen J. Toope
President and Vice-Chancellor

Respectful Debate

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From: Stephen J. Toope
President and Vice Chancellor

To: Members of the UBC Community:

As a globally influential university, UBC is not, nor could it be, immune from conflicts half a world away. These conflicts are both a reminder of the rare peace we enjoy in Canada and a challenge to community values of respect for human dignity and the special place of free expression that universities protect.

When these external conflicts threaten to divide our own community, we need to pay special attention to the rules that govern our conduct as members of the university and as citizens or residents of Canada.

This week a segment of UBC's student population has planned events that are being publicized in a manner offensive to another segment. While the locus of attention of these events is the political situation in the Middle East, the means of publicity at UBC and other Canadian universities has created a chilling impact for some members of our own community.

As a university community, we place a paramount value on the free and lawful expression of ideas and viewpoints. As scholars, we believe that discussion across boundaries and across pre-conceptions is a necessary condition for the resolution of even the most intractable conflicts. At the same time, we are a community that values respect for all others, even those with whom we disagree fundamentally.

For a university, anything that detracts from the free expression of ideas is just not acceptable. Robust debate can scarcely occur, for example, when some members of the community are made to feel personally attacked, not for their ideas but for their very identity. When this happens, university disciplinary policies come into play, and there may be recourse to provincial human rights and federal anti-hate legislation.

Forms of speech should not be banned simply on the grounds that they are "offensive," but if the speech is designed to preclude any speech in response, if it amounts to a threat against a person or an identifiable group, then a line will have been crossed.

As we navigate the shoals of political conflict, I call upon each and every member of our community to display the reason, generosity of spirit and forbearance that must define debate within the University of British Columbia. If these values are threatened, the university will take all necessary action to defend our community life.