

### 305. Frances Widdowson Was Canceled Again. Was It Justified?

Mark Mercer

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University of Lethbridge philosophy professor Paul Viminitz invited political scientist Frances Widdowson to speak to some of his students and to give a public talk. In class, Widdowson spoke about so-called “indigenous ways of knowing” and why universities’ insistence that they be respected are misguided. The title of her planned public talk was “How ‘Woke-ism’ Threatens Academic Freedom.” The classes were held on January 31 and February 2, 2023. Both sessions went well.

Dr. Widdowson’s public talk had been scheduled for February 1. On January 30, though, University of Lethbridge president Michael J. Mahon canceled it, writing in his [statement](#) that “the University will not provide space for this public lecture to occur on campus.”

Just four days earlier, President Mahon had issued a public [statement](#) saying that Widdowson’s talk would go ahead despite widespread opposition to it. Mahon cited freedom of discussion in his statement but then praised those who had organized a counter-talk to coincide with Widdowson’s session.

When Widdowson attempted to give her public talk at the scheduled time anyway, in an open area of the university, students and others shouted her down. After some time had passed, during which she spoke with a few individual protestors, Campus Safety asked Widdowson to leave for her own safety, and she complied.

President Mahon’s cancellation of the talk raises many serious questions about Lethbridge’s stated commitment to freedom of expression on campus and to the academic freedom of its professors, who should, one might think, enjoy equal access to university resources, a right President Mahon denied Dr. Viminitz. It also raises questions about the quality of Lethbridge’s professors, so many of whom agitated for cancellation and so few of whom defended academic values or the academic mission of their institution.

But here, I wish to consider President Mahon’s reasons for canceling Widdowson’s talk. Of course, even if they had been good reasons, it’s hard to imagine that they would have been weighty enough to tip the balance against academic freedom and open discussion. President Mahon, for his part, didn’t think to explain how the reasons on which he acted were better than the reasons for permitting the talk that he gave earlier. Comparative judgement aside, though, were President Mahon’s reasons for canceling the talk good reasons, simply on their own terms?

Here are all the passages of President Mahon's January 30 statement that purport to give justifying reasons:

... the University must be attentive to the safety of our diverse community.

This input confirmed that assertions that seek to minimize the significant and detrimental impact of Canada's residential school system are harmful.

To ensure our community is safe, in the context of this planned lecture, ...

We are committed to the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada. It is clear that the harm associated with this talk is an impediment to meaningful reconciliation.

A continued commitment to providing a safe place for our diverse community, including our faculty, our staff, and especially our students, is critical in allowing us all to contribute to the evolution and growth of the University of Lethbridge.

The references to safety can, I think, be interpreted as a call to protect emotional wellbeing. The references to harm, then, are to emotional pain and debilitation. President Mahon's suggestion is that for some people, hearing ideas that they take to denigrate things that matter to them, in this case their identity and commitments as indigenous people, can be painful and debilitating.

Further, if central to one's own identity is care for the emotional wellbeing of others, then believing that others are hearing things painful and debilitating to them can be painful and debilitating to one. Since Widdowson's views are taken by many members of the Lethbridge community to denigrate things that matter to them, either directly or through care for others, her speaking them will cause emotional harm, or so I understand President Mahon's thinking. (Or he might be saying that refraining from canceling her talk could cause emotional harm.)

President Mahon is correct that many members of the university community believe Widdowson's ideas denigrate things that matter to them. It's not clear, though, that the members of the university community who protested Widdowson's appearance have accurately interpreted her views. It is also far from clear that the best way to promote emotional wellbeing is to confirm people in their vulnerabilities.

Nonetheless, one reason President Mahon canceled Widdowson's public talk is that Widdowson is associated in the minds of some people at Lethbridge with views that, if heard, will cause them harm.

President Mahon seems to think this is a sufficient reason to cancel the talk. For good measure, though, it figures as a premise in two more reasons. The first of these additional reasons is that the university's complicity in the harm threatened by hearing Widdowson will impede meaningful reconciliation between the University of Lethbridge and indigenous Canadians.

The assumption President Mahon seems to be making here is that Lethbridge would be expressing ill will toward indigenous Canadians were it to allow them to be harmed emotionally. The reconciliation that Lethbridge seeks with indigenous Canadians requires good will. Thus, reconciliation requires that Widdowson not be allowed to speak and, indeed, that the university be seen as responsible.

The second of the additional reasons is that were members of the university community to suffer emotional harm as a result of the university's inaction, the evolution and growth of the University of Lethbridge would be stunted. The idea seems to be that in the face of the university's indifference to their emotional wellbeing, indigenous members of the community would abandon their attempts to influence the direction of the university, and that would diminish the university's future.

To gather and summarize these reasons, then, Mahon says he was right to cancel Frances Widdowson's public talk because 1) hearing that talk would harm emotionally members of the Lethbridge community. As well, Mahon was right, he says, because allowing the talk would express indifference to the emotional health of indigenous members of the university community and, thereby, 2) sabotage the university's attempts at reconciliation with indigenous Canadians, as well as 3) alienate indigenous members of the university community from the institution.

It does not matter to these reasons either what Widdowson has said in the past or what she planned to say. It does not matter, that is, whether Widdowson has actually said anything demeaning to indigenous people, only that some believe she has. And that she planned to speak on woke-ism and academic freedom, and not about indigenous Canadians, is irrelevant. What mattered to President Mahon is how his university's inaction would affect certain non-academic goals of the institution, namely, reconciliation and making indigenous members of the university participants in its future.

But what is it that indigenous students and academics at the University of Lethbridge want? Do they want to participate in academic life and reap its benefits? Those who are at Lethbridge to experience academic life would, one would expect, demand that the university honor such academic values as academic freedom and open discussion, and that the university serve its academic mission. People like to be included, certainly, but those who ask that an academic community abandon its academic ways are not seeking to be included in an academic community. President Mahon, then, in canceling the talk, deprived students and professors of the academic community of which they seek to be part.

What of reconciliation? Did canceling Widdowson's talk help to bring the University of Lethbridge and indigenous Canadians closer, or at least prevent their moving apart? Canceling the talk cannot but appear unprincipled and cowardly to people, indigenous and not, who are committed to academic values. By canceling the talk instead of explaining (for a second time, as he had already explained in his original statement) how interfering would be contrary to the academic mission of his institution, President Mahon was appeasing the protestors. An appeaser cannot be respected. If reconciliation requires that the two parties esteem each other's leaders or spokesmen, Mahon has harmed the cause of reconciliation. He has enabled it to become a mere matter of exercising power.

President Mahon, at the same time he lowered the university in the eyes of his partners in reconciliation, also indicated that he holds them in contempt. Indigenous students and professors need his protection, he implied. They are not stable or strong enough either to confront views they think mistaken or to ignore them. He has done them a favor by protecting them from ideas. For their part, then, indigenous members of the university community enfeeble themselves to the extent that they are grateful the president did them this favor.

Finally, did the cancellation mitigate harm? First of all, any harm Widdowson's appearance caused was not wrongful harm. Even if I can emotionally harm you by speaking views with which you disagree, I have not wronged you by doing so—unless, of course, you are my captive. By attending a university that in its written policies protects and celebrates freedom of expression, one has consented to hear things one might not like to hear. For committed academics, the risk of harm is one they willingly take; it's necessary they take it in order to live as academics. The task for professors and administrators is to initiate students into academic values and academic life. University presidents should help students to see the necessity for their education of holding things that matter to them at arm's length in order to examine them critically. That is what the students signed up to do.

Nonetheless, cancellation could not have mitigated harm. The students know what they believe Widdowson's views to be. (Few know what Widdowson's views actually are, but they know what the views are that they attribute to her.) That is, the students are aware of these painful views. That they don't hear the views is irrelevant; they have the views in mind anyway. Widdowson's speaking them would not add anything. It's an affront to academic values, as I said above, to shield people from views, even harmful ones. But Mahon's canceling the talk failed to shield anyone from what they imagine Widdowson would say.

I've put aside the fact that President Mahon's decision to cancel a talk arranged by Paul Viminiz, a professor at his institution, indicates contempt for academic freedom, open inquiry, and the ethos of the university. I've put aside this fact in order to evaluate President Mahon's reasons directly. I conclude that President Mahon's stated reasons for canceling Frances Widdowson's talk fail in their own terms to justify the cancellation. President Mahon's decision spared no one pain or debilitation, it caused no indigenous students to feel at home in an academic environment, and it thwarted reconciliation by reinstalling hierarchies and dependencies between the parties involved.