

President Brett Fairbairn
TRU Board of Governor's Chair Marilyn McLean
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By email to president@tru.ca

TRUFA Decolonization, Reconciliation and Indigenization Committee
Thompson Rivers University Faculty Association
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RE: The TRU Faculty Association's Decolonization, Reconciliation and Indigenization Committee position with respect to reports of anti-Indigenous racism

We are writing to address the ongoing investigation into allegations that Matt Milovick, the TRU Vice-President of Finance reportedly made racist comments regarding Indigenous peoples and gave anti-Indigenous direction to subordinates in the performance of TRU duties.

More specifically, we write about the resulting cultural safety concerns expressed by and to faculty members of the Decolonization, Reconciliation and Indigenization Committee (DRISC). This is because of President Fairbairn and the BOG Chair Marilyn McLean's refusal to remove Mr. Milovick from active duties, and his influence over his staff, pending the outcome of the investigation.

A lack of Indigenous cultural safety continues because Matt Milovick continues to represent TRU on both campus locations (Kamloops and Williams Lake), in the community, provincially, nationally, and internationally. Despite an extended time in which the President and BOG have received several requests from TRU employees and a national educator body to remove Mr. Milovick pending the outcome of the investigation, the TRU leadership has declined to do so. This refusal does nothing to address Indigenous cultural safety and security at TRU. Instead, it supports and creates an unsafe workplace for Indigenous peoples.

We are adding our voices to support the open letter written to the TRU BOG on December 6, 2021 by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). The CAUT represents over 72,000 educators across Canada. The letter expresses serious concerns about TRU's handling of the situation. In fact, the CAUT Director David Robinson states: "The decision to keep Mr. Milovick and Mr. Phillips active in their positions during the investigation casts clouds of doubt over the entire process. It also threatens to inflict serious reputational damage and disrupt the workplace for all employees".

We received notice that Larry Phillips is no longer employed at TRU from CBC Radio on December 22, 2021. There is yet to be an official announcement to Indigenous faculty. We are mindful of how we must proceed given the September 2021 TRU Statement on Academic Freedom which states in part:

Thompson Rivers University recognizes and upholds Indigenous perspectives regarding academic freedom. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples vary in their knowledge systems, but there are some universal beliefs regarding the production and sharing of knowledge. Indigenous elders have said that Professors have a responsibility to search for the truth and be protected while doing so, provided that they do it with respect, kindness, and honesty.

Truth-telling is a requirement that prefaces work to decolonize and Indigenize western education systems and institutions to the extent that it is possible. In that spirit, we are writing to express what we perceive to be a lack of culturally safe and trauma-informed perspectives at the President and BOG levels and to convey how that negatively impacts Indigenous faculty, staff, students, and community members. It conveys that concerns of current harms against Indigenous peoples on campus are of no consequence.

There is no acknowledgment about how these recent reports cumulatively impact Indigenous peoples employed at TRU together with decades by racism, the legacy of Indian residential institutions, or government policies. These harms contribute to a lack of Indigenous sense of safety, security, and well-being on the TRU campus. In addition, the recent report released by the Provost's Anti-Racism Taskforce in 2021 proposed the dismantling of racism openly and transparently. This goal is yet to be realized.

No senior TRU Administrator or member of the TRU BOG has reached out to TRU's Indigenous faculty to inquire or ask how we are coping through the investigation. This absence of concern exists despite knowing about the discovery of 215+ unmarked graves at the site of the Kamloops Residential School. It ignores the horrifying discovery of more than a thousand more unmarked graves across Canada that deeply impact our well-being and feelings of safety and security. Reports of anti-Indigenous racism negatively affects individual and collective Indigenous senses of personal well-being. Indigenous women experience violence and abuse at a rate much higher than any other women demographic in Canada. Indigenous women and students at TRU have a right to feel safe in our post-secondary workplaces.

Recently, some Indigenous faculty witnessed the entire Board of Governors and President walk out of a BOG meeting when Indigenous and non-Indigenous students protested against TRU's handling of issues. Rather than attempt to address the student concerns, the BOG's response was to limit future potential for board disruption. TRU Indigenous faculty members who witnessed the leadership walk-out were shocked at how these leaders received student concerns. Indigenous faculty received no communication from either body about how TRU would address the student's expressed concerns. This behavior is incompatible with an educational institution that for years has identified itself as the "university of choice for Indigenous students." The slogan is incongruent with the allegations of Indigenous racism and anti-Indigenizing comments that were reportedly made by Matt Milovick and the repeated calls for his removal pending the outcome of the lengthy investigation. We are concerned for student cultural safety and well-being on both campus locations, now and into the future.

On November 26, 2021 the Chair of DRISC sent an email to the President asking him to work with the Senior Union representatives of TRUFA and CUPE to resolve reported allegations of anti-Indigenous racism on campus and a need for trauma-informed supports for the complainants. The first email received a form response on December 14, 2021. In response to a December 14, 2021 follow-up email, on December 15, 2021 President Fairbairn responded to the second DRISC email that noted profound disappointment in the President's handling of reported Indigenous racism, and the lack of a trauma-informed process for complainants. President Fairbairn wrote that:

"at this time, I have no direct knowledge of racist or anti-Indigenous statements made by anyone at TRU, other than from what was reported in the media...I have noted your calls for action and those of others on our staff and faculty. I have listened closely, and asked many, many people for their thoughts and opinions. I know that TRU's reputation is being challenged. I understand that many people have been harmed emotionally and triggered by what they have heard and read."

Ultimately, President Fairbairn concluded with the following "In the end, I have realized that this difficult period will take some time to end. My role as president is to listen carefully to many sides of an issue and to make sure that the steps TRU takes are justifiable from the perspective of future generations. Future generations will care about respect, care, and truth. I ask for your patience and understanding as we move into the new year."

The President's response contributes to Indigenous peoples feeling ignored, not valued, and a total lack of care related to acknowledged and ongoing damage that impact current and future generations. His decision to privilege what he believes to be the procedural fairness for Matt Milovick, supercedes the needs of the complainants and the TRU community as a whole. The CAUT December 6, 2021 letter had already identified concerns about faculty unrest the week prior. These issues contribute to our belief that despite the President's denials, TRU is knowingly upholding institutional systems of Indigenous racism at its highest levels.

Further, we are concerned about the lack of accountability and responsibility taken by President Fairbairn and Marilyn McLean for faculty unrest, knowing that many "people have been harmed emotionally and triggered by what they have heard and read". We remain concerned by the decision of President Fairbairn and Board members to maintain the active employment of Matt Milovick under investigation for reported anti-Indigenous and racist comments, pending the outcome of the investigation. This is despite the President's full knowledge that his lack of removal is causing emotional harm and is triggering to many people.

This decision does nothing to demonstrate TRU's understanding about its role in harms against Indigenous peoples on campus. Further, it identifies failures of TRU's EDI policy. It harms relational priorities and accountabilities with Indigenous faculty. It leads us to believe that our concerns about working in culturally safe workplaces are not priorities on the TRU institutional agenda.

We are asking for commitments that the BOG's and President's office will address the ongoing and perceived harms that Indigenous faculty are experiencing through this process.

We are not asking to be reminded of Western one-to-one counseling available to Indigenous faculty through our group benefits. We are not asking to be reminded of our resilience in managing layered and intrusive past harms or expected to shoulder the totality of current Indigenous pain in this institution. We ask for a strong statement from the university to address systemic, institutional, and personal anti-Indigenous and anti-Indigenizing beliefs in unambiguous language and action. We ask that TRU upholds the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the Truth and Reconciliation of Canada's Calls to Action for Education and Health, and prioritize it across the institution's teaching, research, and service work. We ask that TRU formalize concrete actions to demonstrate zero tolerance for anti-Indigenous sentiments and comments as a fundamental starting place. We ask that you do more than simply acknowledge the emotional harms and triggering of people, and take action to end ongoing harms for current and future Indigenous faculty. We ask that you do this in collaboration with the TRUFA, CUPE, and the TRU Student Union. We ask that TRU take immediate steps to relieve Matt Milovick of his duties pending the outcome of the investigation into allegations of reported anti-Indigenous racism while in the performance of his duties. We ask that allegations of anti-Indigenous racism at TRU be dealt with immediacy and compassion for its victims. The institution may not understand that Matt Milovick's continued presence sends a strong message that this post-secondary institution will not protect Indigenous peoples against repeatedly reported anti-Indigenous violence in our workplaces. It is not a message that has any place in higher education. President Fairbairn and the BOG have the power to exercise this action. We ask that you do it in order to fulfil commitments to transform TRU as a place of belonging and empowerment for all.

Respectfully,

**Thompson Rivers University Faculty Association
Decolonization, Reconciliation and Indigenizing Committee**

CC

Premier of BC

Minister of Advanced Education

Shuswap Nation Tribal Council

Union of BC Indian Chiefs

CAUT Director David Robinson

Federation of Post-Secondary Educators President Brent Calvert

Sharon McIvor and Justin Wilson FPSE-DRISC